PURLOINED ICONS: DUTCH 17TH CENTURY PAINTERS IN SOME RECENT WORLD FICTION

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We are used to seeing cultural and artistic icons made the subject of fiction. Novels about art and artists have a long tradition and the genre is alive and well today. Less familiar is the phenomenon of a sudden surge in interest in the icons of a particular country or historical period. Yet in the last few years a surprising number of novels have been written *outside* the Netherlands that are based on Dutch 17th century subjects and in particular on prominent painters of the Golden Age. Most readers of Dutch background probably experience an initial *frisson* of satisfaction in encountering this phenomenon, but perhaps also some slight discomfort stemming from the idea that these icons are being purloined, pilfered, name it what you will, for purposes not immediately apparent. Generally, discomfort soon turns to curiosity, however, and the question as to why the writers chose these topics and how they handle the material becomes paramount.

Three such recent artist novels, arguably the most interesting ones, are *Girl with a Pearl Earring* by Tracy Chevalier (1999)[1], *Rembrandt's Whore* by Sylvie Matton (2002)[2] and *The Lost Diaries of Frans Hals* by Michael Kernan (1994).[3]

Many aspects of these novels could be discussed, because they are generically interesting in their own right. But my focus will be on the artists and their world presented in these novels, which of necessity entails having a brief look at the process of 'world-making', in this case the recreation of certain aspects of the Dutch 17th century, and then a more extensive look at the 'portrait of the artist' presented in these works. Both aspects will also involve a discussion of the novelistic techniques employed in these three very different novels.

Purloined Icons

Girl with a Pear Earring

Vermeer painted his "Girl with Pearl Earring" in mid-career. Chevalier's novel speculates on the identity of the girl and invents a type of love story, set against the background of 17th century Delft, and specifically its arts community. The narrator is Griet, the daughter of a Delft tile painter who lost his eyesight in an accident, who goes to work for the Vermeer family consisting of five children (more will be born), another maid, Tanneke, Vermeer's wife Cathrina, and Maria Thins. Griet's innocence and beauty are soon resented by Cathrina, who already feels vulnerable because she has been banned from entering Vermeer's studio for her clumsiness and obvious indifference to his work. Griet, by contrast, from the start of the novel shows an unusual sense of aesthetics – a fact not lost on Vermeer who, clandestinely taking her on as an assistant in his studio in the attic, teaches her the techniques of grinding paint and developing color palettes. Griet's reservations about transgressing the rules of the house are overcome by her obvious delight not only in learning about Vermeer's art, but in being thus in close proximity to Vermeer. Here Griet meets Anthony van Leeuwenhoek, who introduces Vermeer to the camera obscura – a device Vermeer employs in the painting of a number of his pictures. The couple is able to conceal Griet's apprenticeship until Vermeer's main patron demands that Griet be the subject of the next commission. It is in the process of working on this painting that the relationship between painter and model begins to border on the erotic. The discovery of the painting, and above all the fact that Griet has worn Cathrina's earrings, leads to catastrophe. Griet is sent away, Vermeer, because of his financial dependence on Cathrina accepting the judgment without defending his actions or protecting Griet. In the epilogue, on the occasion of Vermeer's death a few years later, Cathrina hands Griet the pearl earrings he has bequeathed her.

Rembrandt's Whore

is the story of Hendrickje Stoffels, who enters Rembrandt's life as his servant in 1649 after the death of his beloved wife Saskia van Uylenburg. Soon she runs his household, cares for his small son Titus, and eventually ends up in his bed. Rembrandt, because of a clause in Saskia's testament, is prevented from marrying Hendrickje, but Hendrickje does not question Rembrandt's love for her, and she in turn loves him in a direct and simple

way. Amsterdam society, however, and especially the Calvinist congregation, frown upon their liaison and gradually victimize the painter by obstructing public commissions and refusing their patronage. Ostracism and intrigue, cloaked in self-satisfied uprightness, does not prevent the couple from continuing their arrangement. Hendrickje, who has interiorized the tenets of her religion and lives her guilt intensely, nevertheless finds solace in believing that her love is justified. Hendrickje's inner life, her thoughts, dreams, obsessions and nightmares are laid bare in a very modernistic stream of consciousness, in which her preoccupations with the steady decline in Rembrandt's fortunes mingles with her obsessive concern with the plague that seems to be raging constantly in Amsterdam. There is a great physicality to many of the passages describing the daily life in Amsterdam, as in the passages dealing with the artist's world, but very little glamour: we are confronted directly with the smells of the ingredients for paint, of boiling rabbit skins for glue for canvases, of the copper used for etchings. Many passages deal with the intrigues of the bourgeois patrons and Amsterdam powerful; financial as well as legal matters occupy a large part of the novel. Gradually the leitmotiv of the fragility of life and the vulnerability and defenselessness of humanity in the face of disease and death is sounded more and more insistently, until Hendrickje herself perishes in the latest outbreak of the plague.

In *The Lost Diaries of Frans Hals*

the discovery in a Long Island barn of what appear to be journals kept by the painter Frans Hals over the course of his long, cash-poor, but love-filled life sets this novel going. A gallery owner, when consulted about their authenticity, decides to have the diaries translated. He tracks down a ne'er-do-well graduate student "a bit of a flake, but bright", who is working on a thesis on Pieter de Hooch and who has a decent knowledge of Dutch. Peter van Overloop's life, including his love life, is chaotic and unsatisfying. The task of translating the manuscripts, however, gives focus to his life. With obvious zeal and uncharacteristic discipline, Peter accomplishes his task in a surprisingly short time. The central concern of his work, however, that of deciding on the authenticity of the diaries remains in suspense until very late in the novel. Peter is subject to a number of accidents, including a trashing by his roommate's jealous boyfriend, and culminating in

the theft of the manuscripts. All this is set in parallel to a series of episodes from Frans Hals' life: his encounter with Lysbeth Reynier, the love of his life whose loyalty and resilience enables Hals to counter the envy and intrigues of his guild brothers; his troubles with a student of his, the feisty and feminist *avant la lettre* Judith Leyster, for whom he conceives a helpless infatuation at a late age, and whose actions against him threaten his financial survival. All this takes place against the backdrop of Hals' hectic household, and the colorful community life of Haarlem. Much time is also devoted to Hals' rebellion against his straight-laced and conventional bourgeois and Calvinist surroundings. Constantly involved in legal wrangling, in financial ventures, among which is a disastrous attempt to cash in on the tulip speculations, Hals remains an enormously vital and energetic man, and an artist whose single-minded pursuit of his own high artistic standards is ultimately vindicated in the belated and grudging admiration of his fellow artists and the community at large.[4]

Three modes of narration are explored in these novels: a 'neutral' first-person narration by Griet, an interior monologue by Hendrickje Stoffels, and an authorial narrative frame (dealing with the adventures of the hapless Peter van Overloop) within which is found a first-person narrative by Frans Hals (in the form of diary entries).[5] In two cases we have a 'female voice' with all that this term implies, in the case of Kernan the authorial mode suggests no gender, while the inner story has a decidedly 'male' point of view.

These different narrative modes inevitably color our perception of the artist in question, as they do the 'world' in which the characters move. The question of verisimilitude and of 'realism' is thereby introduced – a technical question to which I can only devote some general comments along the way. Authenticity is itself of course a central though ironically posed question in the book on Frans Hals.[6]

Three cities are depicted in these novels, three cultural and artistic centers: Amsterdam, Delft, and Haarlem. The novels cover roughly the period 1615-1676 (Kernan the earliest, 1615 – 1664; Matton 1649-1663, Chevalier the latest, 1664-1676), and therefore make references to similar political constellations, wars, epidemics (the plague

plays a role in all three novels) and economic and social circumstances.[7] In each case, focalization, to use Mieke Bal's term for what used to be called 'point of view,' ultimately 'produces' the artists dealt with in these novels. The ultimate relationship between this 'product' and our historical understanding is of course part of the tension, also the charm, of any fictional treatment of historical topics. I will return to this.

What kind of 'portraits of the artist' do we get in these novels?

In the case both of Rembrandt and Vermeer, a fundamental irony is at work, for conventional wisdom suggests that our interest in Hendrickje or in Griet seems only warranted because of what they might tell us about our 'icons.'' Yet especially Tracy Chevalier has made her narrator into a figure that can claim center stage and hold our attention throughout the novel. In this case, focalization produces only a 'vague' portrait of Vermeer. In the first part of the novel he is hardly visible, and when he gains greater presence by Griet's being in direct contact with him, he is still only seen through Griet's eyes. He is a man of few words and abrupt manner. The author partly legitimizes the painter's taciturnity by obliquely referring to his complicated marriage and his dependent status: his wife has the money, he has to tread carefully. At the same time, Griet is in any case a somewhat inadequate interpreter of Vermeer in his personal and artistic complexity. This adds to the charm and mystery of the novel and is also in line with the choice of a relatively uneducated, though clever girl as narrator. It creates tensions in the narration, however, since for one thing the author relies on heavy symbolism.[8] The most important symbol of course is the pearl earring. It could be said that the piercing of the ears in preparation for the insertion of the pearl earring functions as Griet's symbolic rape. These scenes constitute the most intense episode in the novel. But although for Griet the experience of rape (even if subconsciously realized) is real, here, as in the rest of the novel, *Vermeer's* feelings and emotions remain just beyond the narrator's (and the reader's) grasp. Because of this, Vermeer himself can hardly be called the central character of the novel. It is *he*, ironically, who – novelistically speaking -- lives off the narrator's intense experiences. On a personal level, Vermeer is a failure. He shirks his responsibilities; he does not assume the consequences of his acts. He places art above

personal relationships with both family and Griet. This makes him into an artist out of tune with his times: his art is self-oriented in an age of 'social' art. The incident of the girl with the pearl earring becomes representative of Vermeer's relationship to his time.

Chevalier has hit upon a clever device to allow the reader's visualization of Vermeer's paintings. Griet's father's blindness allows her to describe in detail to him the paintings she finds in the Vermeer household, and those being painted by Vermeer while she is a witness or subject. That she can do so with a degree of insight is the result of her having an extraordinary sensibility. Griet can not only describe accurately what she sees, but she can judge aesthetically and can even assist and make suggestions to Vermeer. Her assisting the painter in turn allows insight into the techniques he uses, among which the *camera obscura* figures prominently. These strategies are part of a process of authentication (so-called) in interpreting backwards from the paintings we have and can analyze. It also allows us to experience the sensuality and physicality of the paint and of the paintings. Chevalier's account of the artistic process — from the grinding of paints to the inclusion and removal of background objects — lies at the core of the novel.[9] This raises the issue of the relationship between the circumstances of a painting's creation and the interpretation of its meaning. This in turn poses the question of 'autobiographical art,' to which I will return.

According to *The Scotsman* of Edinburgh, Sylvie Matton's novel is 'a sumptuously wrought vision of the age.' What is, however, the nature of that vision? Is it a realistic portrait of the historical background to Rembrandt's personal and artistic life? Or is it indeed more in the nature of a 'vision'?[10] Estrangement, rather than *rapprochement*, distance rather than familiarity seems to emanate from the pages of this novel. At all times more subjective than detached, with an atmosphere that is Brueghelian or northern Baroque, obsessive in the reiteration of the fragility of life, filled with social, personal, sexual tension, Matton's 'vision' is an estranged, unfamiliar, predominantly gloomy picture of the Dutch Golden Age. In her interpretation, Calvinism is a religion of guilt which, interiorized and assumed by Hendrickje, is rehearsed in an endless repetition of *idées reçues*, of snatches of prayer and invocation, in strings of images referring to disease, disintegration and death, for which the form of the interior monologue provides

the perfect vehicle. The moral and religious subtext is, however, the creation of Hendrickje's subconscious, and does not necessarily provide an insight into Rembrandt's own religiosity. The effect is a distortion of Rembrandt's world, and undoubtedly also of Dutch society at large.[11]

Moral intolerance, the wish to enforce conformity in sexual mores, is an important contributing factor in the decline of Rembrandt's fortunes; Rembrandt rages against the pettiness with which control is exerted over his profession, once he has fallen from favor, including the allocation of commissions, and in the handling of his debts. His status as an artist is directly related to his social standing, financial viability is dependent on moral approval. To be sure, other factors contribute to his relative decline, factors to do with the economy, with times of war, or with a change in taste. But human malice plays a large role in Matton's book, as it does in Kernan's and to a lesser extent in Chevalier's. The picture drawn by Matton of the relationship between art and life is indeed hardly a flattering one. It is this social function, understressed in Chevalier's text both by Vermeer's own individual practice and by the author's focus on the intensely personal conflict between the artist and his model, which predominates in Matton. We learn, through the eyes of Hendrickje always, far more about Rembrandt the family man, the entrepreneur, the lover, the teacher even, than about his art. Amsterdam, with its bustling commerce, its obsession with money, with its succession of wars and plagues, but also its scientific discoveries and explorations of new territories, is central to this novel.[12] The result is that the 'inner life' of the artist, as in the case of Vermeer, remains largely beyond our grasp.

Specifically the creative process, which was so carefully centered in Chevalier's text, where we get a fairly accurate description of method, ingredients, textures, applications and laws of painting, is almost absent from Matton's text. There are few discussions of art as such (164, 169). Hendrickje describes the paintings as they are being produced, but she sees them in terms of subject, of public taste, as objects to be sold, as means to self-assertion and social standing, rather than in aesthetic terms. Her narrative *persona* is equipped with unusual linguistic skills, unlike Griet, whose narrative is neutral and as 'cool' as Vermeer's colors. Hendrickje becomes part of the paintings by posing for

them, she is 'in them' as subject, but also, by mentally and imaginatively placing herself into them and becoming the mythological or historical subjects. Hers is a total *Einfühlung* (empathy), an identification process.

But this *Einfühlung* creates obstacles for the reader, who must re-construct the paintings in question. Hendrickje's descriptions are not technical; she does not practice *Ekphrasis*, but rather lets her imagination create the tableaux. Matton does not provide illustrations and is somewhat snobbishly reticent about titles and dates of the paintings obliquely referred to by Hendrickje. This leads to a kind of guessing game beloved of intellectuals and culture buffs. Its effect is to create an extra apparatus outside the text. In the case of Vermeer, the task was relatively light, even without the illustrations provided. In Rembrandt's case, a catalogue in hand provides at the same time an authenticating element and a sub/context which interprets what is being interpreted. Whether the subjective view provided by Hendrickje Stoffels can enlighten us as to the meaning, or even the origin of Rembrandt's paintings is doubtful. This kind of aesthetic is beyond categories of realism or verisimilitude. The reader falls back on the observer's subjectivity and seeks to establish a harmony between it and his or her own.

Quite a different set of questions is raised by Michael Kernan's treatment of Frans Hals. Here a fundamental irony is basic to the novel: no matter how meticulously Kernan describes the journals, no matter how much time is spent by his scholar-cum-detective Peter van Overloop, neither can ever prove the authenticity of the diaries, since they are the creation of Kernan himself, and the reader is fully aware of it. Because of his pact with the author, however, reader involvement remains high, and since Kernan, like Matton and Chevalier, fulfills a minimum of verisimilitude, and in the diary entries a high degree of realism, he is able to retain tension and even, paradoxically, suspense. Kernan uses the externals of the novel with great skill: not only does he introduce photographs to 'document' Hals's reference to his paintings, he also describes the paintings in detail, discussing them in scholarly fashion *after* the descriptions by Hals himself, corroborating, documenting them by references to catalogues, to historical works such as Simon Schama's *Embarrassment of Riches*, and so on. He also spends much time describing the physical shape of the books, their binding, texture, Hals's handwriting,

even the ink used. These details are not only pressed into the service of a 'realistic' narrative, but also serve to further the detective aspect of the novel. In contrast to the first-person narrators of the other two novels, Kernan introduces us to the scholarly approach to painting and painters.

In introducing a second story, and a frame construction, Kernan also allows a parallel or contrastive reading of the two stories. At the same time, this more modern element of narrative technique allows for multiple levels of reading of both characters and events. Kernan attempts, in contrast with especially Matton, to reach across the distance in time, to 'humanize' the artist, to make the past familiar rather than strange. People, Kernan seems to say, are roughly the same at all times. Anthropology in the structuralist variety may indeed show this profound sameness; sociologically, religiously orientated anthropologists will argue the very opposite. The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, too, as a cultural historian, maintained the latter: by emphasizing the 'strangeness' of the past, we gain in understanding. Readers coming from Matton to Kernan will be in a quandary trying to decide whether 17th century Holland is a profoundly alien world, or one to which one may easily have access. Focalization, once again, causes the divergence between Hendrickje and Hals: Where there is no contradiction between the *actual* historical backgrounds, in which evil, disease and death are omnipresent, Hals' own vision of life, his boundless energy and down-to-earth good sense and humor result in a general tone that is 'worlds' removed from Hendrickje's (and by implication Rembrandt's).

The artists that emerge from these novels may now be submitted to the same kind of scrutiny to which all historical novels are subject. I have dealt with this in papers on Truitje Bosboom Toussaint and on Harry Mulisch's Hitler book.[13] Problems of historical accuracy come into consideration *even* when we are dealing with fiction. Sir Walter Scott walked a fine line: his historically documented figures are 'true' the way Matton claims her historical Rembrandt is 'true,' but his surrounding characters are freely invented. Matton and Chevalier, on the contrary, make the documented characters play secondary roles. This is one of the reasons for the 'vagueness' of Vermeer and Rembrandt. Griet is completely fictional; Hendrickje Stoffels is a historical person, but we know practically

nothing about her. Kernan is much bolder here: even though Hals is well documented, he has him speak in his own voice. The irony of his novel is the claimed authenticity within a fictitious world.

Obviously, in order to even engage with the writer, certain conditions must be met. Realism is crucial for all three texts, but it can be formulated in strikingly different ways. It is a criterion for admiration by the critics, but how 'real' is this realism? Dan Brown, (in)famous author of *The Da Vinci Code*, claims that he has invented nothing; Matton writes "I think I may say that in this novel everything is true. Nothing has been invented." And she refers to documents as sources as proof of that statement. Are novels then an alternative way of understanding the past?[14] Do novels give us entrance into the world in which certain artists lived and worked? Even more specifically, do people read books about artists in order to understand their art? Clearly, there is more involved than a simple curiosity about certain paintings that are in the public cultural domain.[15]

It is an enduring conviction that art can be appreciated by understanding the artist. We certainly see proof of this idea in such perennial chestnuts as people's fascination with Van Gogh's ear. The *Girl with the Pearl Earring* to some extent falls within this category, but the notion of biographical art lies at the bottom of it. The creative process is a mystery, but the attempt to re-create it out of biography is universal. Rather than to see the history of art as a history of styles and influences, or of religious, philosophical and social circumstances, the impulse to find the 'reason' for works of art in the artist's personal life remains irresistible.[16]

Art appreciation needs a story, and where there is none, or where it is inaccessible, writers invent one.

List of Illustrations

1. Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn: *Batsheba with the Letter of King David*. 1654, oil., 142 x 142 cm. Paris: Musée du Louvre.

2. Jan Vermeer van Delft: *Girl with a Pearl Earring.* Ca. 1665, 46,5 x 40 cm. Mauritshuis, The Hague.

3. Frans Hals: *Banquet of the Officers of the St. Hadrian's Militia Company of Haarlem.* 1627. Oil, 183 x 266,5 cm. Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem.

Notes

[1] Tracy Chevalier, *Girl with a Pear Earring*, New York: Penguin Dutton, 1999.

[2] Sylvie Matton, *Rembrandt's Whore*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2001 (orig. edition: Paris: Plon, 1997)

[3] Michael Kernan, *The Lost Diaries of Frans Hals*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1994.
Other recent novels dealing with similar topics are Susan Vreeland's *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*, *Tulip Fever* by Deborah Moggach, and Matthew Hart's *The Irish Game*, a detective novel in which a Vermeer painting plays a prominent role. Finally, there is a novel by Rudy Rucker about the 16th century, *As Above, So Below: A Novel of Peter Brueghel*).

[4] It should be noted that only the title of Michael Kernan's book on Frans Hals suggests that the central character is the artist himself, and will be given a voice; Tracy Chevalier's title refers to a (sufficiently well-known) painting, and by implication also the possible *subject* of that painting, and only by extension refers to the artist (Vermeer) himself. That the ultimate (supposed) subject of the painting will also narrate her own (assuredly completely fictitious) story is not at first evident. Matton's title, finally, suggests a (not immediately identifiable) figure in the proximity of Rembrandt, one which, it turns out, also narrates in her own voice, this time in the form of an interior monologue.

[5] In the case of Griet the story is told retrospectively, though with the intensity rather than the 'reflectivity' emphasized; in Hendrickje Stoffels' case, the interior monologue proceeds episodically, with significant gaps; here too the narrative has an intensity which stays close to its subject matter. In the case of Frans Hals the 'inner story' is episodic, with gaps, but chronological; the frame story, on the other hand, proceeds smoothly and without interruptions.

[6] One aspect that I might mention here is the 'external' frame with which these novels are accompanied – elements of the kind Jean Genette discusses at length in *Seuils*. There are illustrations and footnotes in two of the texts, and direct references to sources in the Hals book. In the case of Matton and Chevalier the chapters are also headed by the exact year. Such 'authenticating' elements introduce a degree of ambivalence: do they strengthen the novel's plausibility or are they part of a 'game'?

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[7] Which episodes in 'real' historical time are chosen depends, in the case of Matton on the dates of her sources, in the case of Chevalier on a more or less fixable date (that of the Vermeer painting), and in the case of Kernan on an arbitrary choice. A similar range of approaches to the artists themselves can also be noted as a starting point. Hendrickje Stoffels supplements her vision of Rembrandt's paintings by her experience of having been a subject of some of them herself; Griet brings an unusual innate aesthetic sense to the contemplation of Vermeer's paintings and ultimately even in a modest way participates in the creative process. In the case of the student Peter van Overloop, the paintings referred to briefly in Frans Hals' diaries are placed in the proper context, dated, the diary thereby 'authenticated'— aesthetic considerations play little or no role in this process.

[8] There is the recurring motif of a knife suggesting violence (first and last episodes in the novel), there is the broken tile signifying the sundering of Griet from her sister; there is also much talk of the importance of the head covering in association with chastity. This symbolism plays out in the narrative itself, not in the dialogue or Griet's reported thoughts.

[9] Finally, by linking the paintings to specific persons or situations, Chevalier suggests that certain established interpretations of Vermeer's art may be called into question (e.g. p. 137).

[10] Matton's novel, it seems to me, practices rather the 'alien' view with which the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga approached his subject, the late Burgundian period [in *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, first published in Dutch in 1919].

[11] Sex is the central relationship between Rembrandt and his concubine; it remains alive and strong throughout the years of tribulation. The books strongest writing is associated with sex and sensuality, but also birth-giving and death.

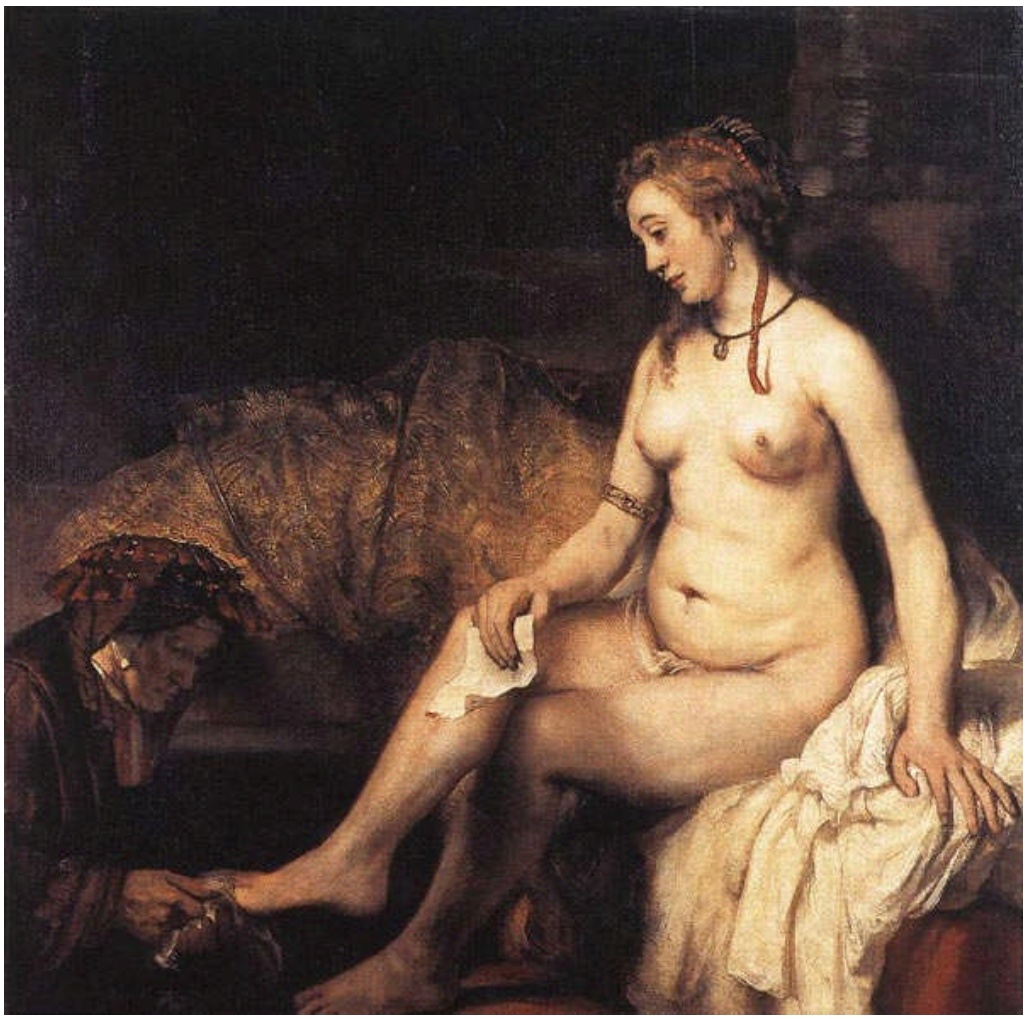
[12] Such a focus on external events, referred to explicitly by name and date, appears suspect to the graduate student Overloop in *his* quest for authentication of Frans Hals' diaries. People do not live historically, are not aware of the great events, do not have access to such data. Matton emphasizes her 'detailed historical research,' as the *Magazine littéraire* of Paris notes.

[13] "Anna Louisa Geertruida Bosboom-Toussaint." *Women Writing in Dutch* (ed. Kristiaan Aercke). New York & London: Garland, 1994, 297-352. -- "The Perils of Mythmaking: Harry Mulisch's Siegfried (2001)." *Canadian Journal of Netherlandic Studies*, XXVII, I (2006), 11-31.

[14] There is, generally speaking, a new interest in history, dating perhaps from as far back as Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. The Middle Ages are big not only in popular scholarly works but also in literature. Other historical periods also have experienced a boom. Within this broad historical interest, the Dutch Golden Age offers some specific interests, primarily in its art, which make it a serious contender.

[15] One item of particular interest may trigger a phenomenon: case in point, the *Da Vinci Code*. In the case of Dutch 17th century art, Tracy Chevalier's novel has undoubtedly stimulated a kind of 'boom.' Yet Kernan wrote his novel before Chevalier.

[16] Here's what Susan Vreeland, in an interview about her book *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* had to say: "In the case of paintings I like to ask: Who sat as model for the artist? What was their relationship? Was the painter sick with dread over how he would feed his family? What did his children want from him the day he worked on this? Was his wife happy? Was he contented with his work?" (Appendix, 4)



Dierick Fig. 1

Dierick Fig. 2

Dierick Fig. 3