Time and Temporality in 17th-Century Dutch Genre Painting

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Over the course of the 17th century, Dutch artists produced images that reflected a growing consciousness of time. [1] Floral still lifes developed from tidy, static bouquets in full bloom to dynamic assortments of blossoms budding, blooming, and withering, conveying notions of transience and mortality. Land- and seascape paintings began to show greater attention to animation, with winds rustling trees and rippling the water, shadows stretching across grassy pastures, and clouds drifting through the sky, all suggesting the temporal specificity of a certain time of day, season, or weather pattern. Even in genre painting, scenes are portrayed so naturally that they feel spontaneous and true. In the works by Johannes Vermeer and his contemporaries, men and women write letters, play music, and groom their children with such ease, they evoke moments captured in time.

Among the first genre painters to demonstrate this interest in time and temporality—the state of existing within or having some relationship to time—was Gerard ter Borch. In works such as his *Woman Writing a Letter*, Ter Borch masterfully portrays the quiet moment of a young woman putting her private thoughts to paper [fig. 1]. Pictured quill in hand, absorbed in her writing, she occupies her space with such sincerity that it feels as if Ter Borch observed this fleeting scene from life. And it is possible that he did: the woman in the picture is his half-sister Gesina, who was around 22 or 23 years old at the time Ter Borch painted the work.

Ter Borch was extremely fond of Gesina, who was an artist in her own right. An avid copyist and illustrator, as well as poet, composer, and author of emblematic literature, she was particularly interested in Petrarchan concepts of love, especially love's trials and tribulations. [2] A scene of Gesina leaning over a letter, the stillness of her gently sloping form and fixed gaze broken only by the actively upright quill and carpet hurriedly pushed aside, could have easily been one Ter Borch stumbled

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upon in his daily life. Unusual, however, was his decision to render this sight. With its feeling of the momentary, the composition is a remarkable departure from earlier 17th-century genre paintings by artists such as Willem Buytewech or Esaias van de Velde, who produced festive communal gatherings set in lavish outdoor spaces [fig. 2].

Ter Borch's decision to portray Gesina in such a transient moment has made *Woman Writing a Letter* one of the most memorable and enduring images of the Dutch Golden Age. It also dovetails with several cultural events and phenomena that had an impact on the rhythm and regularity of daily life as well as on reflections on time and transience. Beginning in the 17th century, for example, there emerged an interest in the composition of diaries and autobiographies. [3] Among the most famous of these so-called ego-documents is the memoir of Constantijn Huygens, secretary of the stadholder Frederik Hendrik, which Huygens wrote in 1631, composing a linear account of the first 35 years of his life, including his introduction to a young Rembrandt van Rijn. [4] However, diaries and autobiographies of otherwise unknown individuals—a schoolmaster from The Hague, a rhetorician from Amsterdam—are also extant. Like Huygens's diary, they are not only temporally structured, but also record genealogical data, personal accomplishments, musings on the future, and various other details about their authors' private, personal worlds, revealing the same interest in the nature of time and existence so beautifully articulated by Ter Borch in *Woman Writing a Letter*. [5]

A new awareness of time is also found in scientific circles, most famously that of Christiaan Huygens, Constantijn's son, whose interest in fixing and measuring time led him to develop the first pendulum clock in 1656. [6] Although Galileo articulated the principle of the pendulum in 1602, Huygens developed the concept for clock making by using the pendulum to regulate the mechanism of movement in place of the older, inaccurate system of pulled weights. By the end of 1656, the first pendulum clock after his design was produced. This new technology so vastly improved the accuracy of clocks (not the least of which because it enabled the addition of a minute and even second hand) that transportation systems became scheduled, and, more importantly, accurate. One could travel by horse-drawn barge (*trekschuit*) from Amsterdam to Haarlem, for example, in one hour and from Haarlem to Leiden in two hours, with trips leaving every hour, as well as from Delft to The Hague in one hour and fifteen minutes, departing every half hour, with bells ringing to announce departures. The barge system was, in fact, so dependable that

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foreigners routinely marveled at how faithfully it observed its published schedules, and skippers faced heavy penalties when they departed or arrived late. [7] Later, in 1675, Huygens invented the spiral spring balance, which could be applied to wristwatches, shifting their function from the realm of decoration to actually keeping time. [8]

The personal experience of time was, thus, undergoing a dramatic change in the 17th century. For Ter Borch and his contemporaries, this shift may have been even more pronounced as histories, treatises, and encomia praising the timelessness of art and artists appeared in publication. Beginning with Karel van Mander, whose 1604 *Het Schilder-boek* (The painting book) included biographies of Dutch and Flemish artists, theorists and critics published texts eulogizing artists dead and living, perhaps emboldening the latter to consider their own places in history. Philips Angel's address to the Leiden Painter's Guild, *Lof der Schilder-konst* (Praise of the art of painting), given in 1641 and swiftly published in 1642, for example, repeatedly referenced the brilliance of Gerrit Dou [fig. 3] and assured artists that "through our art we shall wrest ourselves from the voracity of mortality and triumph in spite of death—the strangler of all things—and shall flourish from one century to the next without withering." [9]

In many ways, Ter Borch's *Woman Writing a Letter* embodies the changing relationship with time in the 17th century. As both an image of the momentary and an object that has survived far longer than its maker, it reflects the transient and the timeless. The degree to which scientific inventions, critical publications, ego-documents, and broader cultural phenomena influenced Ter Borch and his contemporaries is difficult to determine with any certainty. Nevertheless, the relationship between their paintings' subjects and the growing interest in time and temporality highlights some connection. And, as Angel anticipated in his address, through their art, Dutch genre painters have indeed wrested themselves from mortality since "paintings can last for hundreds of years, and that is enough." [10]

COMPARATIVE FIGURES

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fig. 1 Gerard ter Borch, *Woman Writing a Letter*, c. 1655–1656, oil on panel, Royal Picture Gallery Mauritshuis, The Hague. Photography by Margareta Svensson

fig. 2 Esaias van de Velde I, *An Elegant Company in a Garden*, 1614, oil on canvas, Rose-Marie and Eijk van Otterloo Collection

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fig. 3 Gerrit Dou, *A Young Lady Playing a Clavichord*, c. 1667, oil on panel, Private collection

NOTES

[1] Ann Jensen Adams has written thoughtfully on this phenomenon in relation to 17th-century Dutch portraiture. In particular, see "Temporality and the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Portrait," *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 5, no. 2 (Summer 2013): DOI:10.5092/jhna.2013.5.2.15.

[2] On Gesina's work, see Alison M. Kettering, *Drawings from the Ter Borch Studio Estate in the Rijksmuseum*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1988), 2:435–436.

[3] For a summary of Dutch ego-document research, see Mieke B. Smits-Velde, "Images of Private Life in Some Early Seventeenth-Century Dutch Ego-Documents," in *The Public and Private in Dutch Culture of the Golden Age*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Adele Seeff (Newark, 2000), 174–175n3.

[4] Constantijn Huygens, *Mijn jeugd*, trans. and ed. C. L. Heesakkers (Amsterdam, 1987).

[5] Mieke B. Smits-Velde discusses the ego-documents of David Beck, a schoolmaster from The Hague (1624); Jan Sijwertsz Kolm, an Amsterdam painter and rhetorician (1628); and Constantijn Huygens, secretary of the

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stadholder Frederik Hendrik (1631) in Mieke B. Smits-Velde, “Images of Private Life in Some Early Seventeenth-Century Dutch Ego-Documents,” in *The Public and Private in Dutch Culture of the Golden Age*, ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Adele Seeff (Newark, 2000), 164–177. See also Rudolf Dekker, *Family, Culture and Society in the Diary of Constantijn Huygens Jr, Secretary to Stadholder-King William of Orange* (Leiden, 2013).

[6] On Huygens’s developments in timekeeping, see Clare Vincent, “European Clocks in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/clck/hd_clck.htm (accessed July 13, 2017).

[7] Jan de Vries, *Barges and Capitalism: Passenger Transportation in the Dutch Economy, 1632–1839* (Utrecht, 1981), 24; Leiden Municipal Archive, “Trekvaarten en jaagpaden,” no. 1, Leiden-Delft/The Hague register, September 3, 1666; Rotterdam Municipal Archive, “Bescheiden betreffende de scheepvaart,” no. 32, April 22, 1673.

[8] Clare Vincent and J. H. Leopold, “Seventeenth-Century European Watches,” in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/watc/hd_watc.htm (accessed July 13, 2017).

[9] Quoted in Eric Jan Sluijter, *Seductress of Sight* (Zwolle, 2000), 220.

[10] Philips Angel, “Praise of Painting,” trans. Michael Hoyle, *Simiolus* 24, no. 2/3 (1996): 239.

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