

Masters of the Everyday: Dutch Artists in the Age of Vermeer



(The Royal Collection/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2016)

Dogs, card games, open birdcages, empty cupboards. Lutes, ravens, owls and skulls... all 'everyday things' indeed (well maybe not the skulls...) but in 17th century Dutch painting they are much more than that. In *Masters of the Everyday: Dutch Artists in the Age of Vermeer*, an engaging new exhibition curated by Surveyor of The Queen's Pictures **Desmond Shawe-Taylor** and now at **The Queen's Gallery**, we see the minutiae of domestic life, high and low, portrayed in exquisite detail – but the contemporary viewer would also have recognised subtle messages and codes in almost every picture.

Charles I was a passionate art collector, and although much of his collection was sold after his execution, many works were recovered (either by purchase or by royal 'request' – writing in *The Guardian* in 2006, Charlotte Higgins described it as a 'forcible reassembling') at the time of the Restoration. **George III** also collected – indeed, the only Vermeer in the exhibition was acquired by him almost by accident – and **George IV** kept up the family tradition, enjoying paintings of the simple life despite his own lavish existence.

In **The Dutch Golden Age** the Netherlands was at the forefront of trade, science and art. Its painters became world leaders in still life, landscape and genre (domestic settings, interiors, parties, games), but behind all the abundance and humour of their works there were often also moral messages, warnings of the consequence of too much bad behaviour – and it

is these warnings that were most often conveyed in symbols, clues that the 21st century audience must work to unravel.

Many Dutch artists visited England in the early 1600s, though most came to paint portraits and ships. The first two featured in this exhibition may focus on individuals rather than crowds, costume rather than comestibles, but each (even if coincidentally) also demonstrates skill in the depiction of interiors.



(The Royal Collection/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2016)

Hendrick Pot was invited to London in 1632 to paint the Royal Family; his group portrait of ***Charles I, Henrietta Maria and the Prince of Wales*** shows **Charles II**, dressed, as was the custom, as a little girl, looking for all the world as if he is about to fall off the table on which he is perched alongside his father's crown and sceptre. The King maintains a regal stance, the toe of his shoe pointed fashionably outwards; Henrietta holds a sprig of laurel, a symbol of royal glory, but both she and her child still seem 'human' and real. The figures are framed by sumptuous cerise curtains, the rich fringe on the tablecloth is almost tangible; although these are really artist's props, they attempt to create a domestic (albeit *regally* domestic) scene.



(The Royal Collection/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2016)

More symbols are found in Pot's ***Lady and a Gentleman in an Interior, 'A Startling Introduction'*** in which a woman appears to be threatening to stab herself if the 'gentleman' doesn't

back off. The rather angry looking dogs at the woman's skirts suggest vice, while the shafts of light entering from the top left represent virtue.



(The Royal
Collection/© Her
Majesty Queen
Elizabeth II 2016)

Hendrick ter Brugghen was a follower of **Caravaggio**, though it is unlikely that he ever met him, and he doesn't seem to have shared Caravaggio's penchant for violence. His huge oil painting ***A Laughing Bravo with a Bass Viol and a Glass*** shows a jolly musician (described in the King's inventory as 'a swaggerins, laffing fellowe'), his curly brown hair escaping from his plumed hat, enjoying a drink. Although the colours in this portrait are predominantly dark and earthy, it retains a cheerful feel; the generous sleeves of the man's (surprisingly clean-looking) costume and the fine detail of the feathers in his cap again highlight the artist's extraordinary skill.



The Dutch of the 17th century were very keen to have art in their homes – paintings were for the middle classes not just the rich few, and as a result huge numbers were churned out, some predictably better than others. **Peter Mundy**, an Englishman who visited Amsterdam in 1640, wrote;

As for the Art off Painting and affection off the people to Pictures, I thincke none other goe beeyond them, ... All in generall striving to adorne their houses ... with costly peeces, Butchers and bakers ... yea many tymes Blacksmiths, Coblers, etts., will have some picture or other by their Forge and in their stalle. Such is the generall Notion, enclination and delight that these Countrie Native[s] have to Paintings.



By 1643 an artist called **Isack van Ostade** was painting scenes more reminiscent of **Pieter Bruegel**, the 16th century pioneer of genre painting. Van Ostade's ***A Village Fair, with a Church behind*** shows peasants cavorting in the foreground, overlooked by the spires of the vast kerk. The figures are detailed; two stand on plinths reading from papers, others sell fruit to two dwarves, one in bare feet on the dusty road, still others just sit and chat, or gamble. A slightly more affluent man on horseback sports a turquoise shirt and leather bag. Recent conservation work has also uncovered a squatting figure relieving himself beside a hedge – it's believed this was painted over in 1903, in deference to the sensibilities of an Edwardian audience.



(The Royal Collection/©
Her Majesty Queen
Elizabeth II 2016)

Isack and his brother **Adrien** were pupils of **Frans Hals** – Isack specialised in exteriors, Adrien in 'humble interiors'. Adrien's ***The Interior of a Peasant's Cottage*** (1668) shows a small, rough room with an earthen floor. We see a husband and wife, she holding the baby, their older child sitting at a small table. All of them have rather odd, though happy, faces; the parents, with their long curly noses, reminded me of Ian Fleming's Child Catcher, the husband's hat looks like an inverted pudding basin, and the child has a strange flattened visage beneath his red cap. The cottage is basic, the cupboards are open and bare, a plate holds only a bone, yet the people look well enough fed, there is bread on the table; this is a sympathetic scene of domestic happiness. Van Ostade's use of perspective gradually leads the viewer further back into the room, where we see all manner of peasant

domestic ephemera – a commode, a broom, a basket – and finally three shadowy figures.



Almost everyone has probably heard of **Rembrandt**, but how many have heard of **Gerrit Dou**? I certainly hadn't, but in his 17th century lifetime Dou was more admired than the painter of *The Night Watch* himself. Dou founded the **Leiden Fijnschilders** (Leiden Fine Painters) – a school depicting fine surfaces using rich colours and highly detailed technique, filling even modest interiors with 'an astonishing quantity of things'. The Leiden Fijnschilders influenced almost every artist in this exhibition, and as the importance of furniture, instruments, pewter and glassware rose in Dutch society, so also did the status of this type of painting.



(The Royal
Collection/© Her
Majesty Queen
Elizabeth II 2016)

From Rembrandt Dou had learned to paint natural light, usually falling from a window in the left foreground so that more distant forms sank into shadow. In his tiny ***A Girl Chopping Onions*** (1646) a small, well-dressed boy holds an onion out to the girl as she works with a *mezzaluna*. The girl's fingers are perfectly executed – it is said that Dou could take over five days to paint just one hand, and that he had to have his own brushes made to accommodate the fineness of his work. Here the girl looks a little wary, or maybe just fed up with the smell of onions... but in the 17th century onions were seen as an aphrodisiac and chopping them was a common artistic motif. An open and empty birdcage on the wall above suggests lost virginity – the bird has flown (the Dutch word *vogel* (bird) was also a slang term for copulation); many of the utensils

around the room have sexual connotations. The young boy has been variously interpreted as representing Cupid or innocence.



(The Royal
Collection/© Her
Majesty Queen
Elizabeth II 2016)

Whilst *A Girl Chopping Onions* employs a pulled-back curtain to allow us to see into the kitchen, in *The Grocer's Shop*) Dou progresses to the pictorial illusion of a stone arched window to frame the scene, a device enabling him to depict a wide range of objects in the foreground. The tone of the painting is warmer, there is perhaps more going on – a woman weighs out goods for her customer, while behind her a man serves at another counter and a third woman looks at the viewer as she leaves the shop. The picture is crammed with pointers to the success of the Dutch economy; local goods such as dairy products and meat, imported delicacies – lemons and exotic sweets. There is a homely, domestic atmosphere, everything is wholesome and respectable. The door of the ubiquitous bird cage on the wall is firmly closed.



There is a great deal of comedy in this exhibition; **Nicholas Maes' *The Listening Housewife*** (1655) combines expert use of light with humour, as a smiling woman descends a traditional steep staircase to catch her servant canoodling with 'visitors' in the basement. The housewife's lovely white robe and red slippers are beautifully illuminated, her hands perfect, one holding the stair rope while with the other she puts a finger to her lips, warning us not to give her away. And this time it is a cat rather than a dog that provides a comment on the situation; cats may represent illicit love, although if this one does, it surely looks very comfortable

with the situation. Meanwhile **Gabriel Metsu's *The Cello Player*** (c 1658) shows two lovesick youths, one sighing on a balcony, the other tuning a suggestively-placed cello, both looking rather silly, as the object of their desires stands on the stairs. A little dog looks up at his mistress. Could she, perhaps, be not a potential lover but the boys' mother telling them to get a grip?



(The Royal Collection/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2016)

Pieter Bruegel's legacy can be seen as much in the 'multi-figure free-for-alls' of Jan Steen as the village scenes of the van Ostades. Steen was the extrovert child of brewers, and drink plays a part in many of his celebrated works; he also frequently paints himself into the scenes he depicts, 'boozing and brawling with the best of them, and always laughing, as if to invite our indulgence'. His ***A Twelfth Night Feast: The King Drinks*** is full of fascinating detail; a child lifts her pink skirt to play a game with three candles (presumably representing the Three Kings), two grotesque peasants encourage the 'Lord of Misrule' to take yet another drink – he already looks quite dyspeptic – and a young boy in a bright red cap lights up the scene. There are traditional Dutch waffles and breads, beautifully painted drinking vessels, and yet another dog. The artist is in there too, brandishing fresh pipes and laughing merrily.



(The Royal Collection/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2016)

Steen's *A Village Revel* meanwhile, shows a celebration descending into drunkenness. Everyone seems to be having a wild time – even the monks cavorting in their boat. There are three churches in the background, but the sight of these doesn't inhibit the revellers; there are punch-ups, a knife fight, a man about to whack an old woman with a wooden mallet. The only straight-laced figure appears to be a soldier with a narrow pointy hat and an equally narrow and pointy face. He holds a lamp in his hand and is thought to be an allusion to Diogenes, the controversial Greek philosopher who carried a lamp around in daylight, saying that he was 'looking for an honest man'.



(The Royal
Collection/© Her
Majesty Queen
Elizabeth II 2016)

In *A Woman at her Toilet* a painting much admired by George IV, Steen depicts his subject sitting on a four poster bed to take off her blue stockings. Her breasts bulge out of her bodice (although half-undressed, she still has her hat on – unless it is perhaps her sleeping bonnet?), her shoes are cast across the floor. Around her, however, Steen paints a lute with a broken string, a skull and some ivy, the latter two symbolic of the transitory nature of life; we see also a candle blown out and an empty jewellery box. The message is clear – sensuality can lead to ruin – but I can't help but like this woman, with her reassuringly solid legs, her untidy habits and her little dog (symbolic as he no doubt is) allowed to sleep on her bed. The artist's technique is also outstanding, the pink and orange fabrics sumptuous, the light falling across the tiled floor.



(The Royal

Collection/© Her
Majesty Queen
Elizabeth II 2016)

One of my favourite paintings in this exhibition is **Pieter de Hooch's *A Courtyard in Delft at Evening: a Woman Spinning***. De Hooch captures sunlight through strong tonal contrasts – reds, oranges and yellows; his shadows are crisp, his colours bright. The woman spins with her back to us, a girl carries water; we can feel the fading heat of the day, the warmth exuded by the stonework. The substantial house in the background is richly detailed; behind it a church tower.



And so to **Johannes Vermeer** himself; one of the greatest artists of the Golden Age, painter of that *Girl with a Pearl Earring* and 33 other masterpieces – yes, only 33, most of them set in the same two small rooms in Delft. He was as slow a worker as Gerrit Dou and also favoured the use of very expensive pigments, which is perhaps why he died in debt. It took two hundred years for his mastery to be recognised; he is now seen as the master of Dutch light (a light which, it is suggested, can no longer be seen, as once the land was drained its quality changed). Here we see ***Lady at the Virginals with Gentleman*** – a picture that only entered royal possession as part of a job lot, when **George III** bought the collection of Venetian artist Giovanni Antonio Pelligrini from Consul Joseph Smith (Canaletto's agent). The lady plays the virginals; her male companion looks to her, not us. The artist's easel is reflected in the looking glass on the wall; like us he is both present and yet excluded from this intimate scene. The foreground is taken up not with the figures, but a richly covered table, a geometrically tiled floor, windows through which sunlight falls on the contented pair; 'the subject of this enigmatic painting seems to be not the figures but the space, and the light and sounds that fill it'.



(The Royal
Collection/© Her
Majesty Queen
Elizabeth II 2016)

In the late 17th century the Dutch middle classes became wealthier and began to adopt the manners of the French aristocracy. **Ludolf de Jong's *A Formal Garden: three ladies surprised by a Gentleman*** seems a million miles from de Hooch's Delft courtyard; **Godfried Schalcken's *A Family Concert*** shows a prosperous and well-behaved family group, a far cry from Jan Steen's revelries. Schalcken's ***The Game of 'Lady, Come into the Garden'*** is, however, slightly less proper, and all the more attractive for it. The 'game' appears to be some sort of 17th century strip poker; not much has been revealed, but all the participants look very merry – even the man in the foreground seems amused to have lost his coat, overtrousers and shoes, though this may be as far as he has to go. This is no country tavern; opulent tapestries frame the scene, the ladies' dresses are rich and voluminous. As the century ended, the fortunes of the Golden Age painters waned; today we see them as masters of light and space, a reputation that can only be boosted by Desmond Shawe-Taylor's wonderful exhibition.

Masters of the Everyday: Dutch Artists in the Age of Vermeer is at **The Queen's Gallery, Palace of Holyroodhouse** until 24th July 2016. It will then travel to the **Mauritshuis, The Hague**, where it will be open 29th September 2016-8th January 2017. .

