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An invitation to compare: Frans van Mieris's Cloth Shop in the context of early modern art collecting

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Frans van Mieris's *Cloth Shop*, signed and dated 1660, has long been regarded as a landmark in the painter's career (Fig. 1). To date, art historians have mostly sought to uncover the 'meaning' of the painting through iconographic analysis, finding moralizing messages in the interplay of figures and the surrounding objects. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century commentators and biographers, on the other hand, emphasized the sale of this particular painting – at a hefty price to Archduke Leopold Wilhelm of Austria – as evidence of Van Mieris's growing fame among princely collectors. By situating *The Cloth Shop* within a larger context of elite collecting in seventeenth-century Europe, this paper argues that the content and manner of signification in this painting were intricately linked with its function in contemporary cultural practices.

The seventeenth century in the Dutch Republic was a period when political, economic, and social hierarchies were being redrawn in an emerging state. In this context, the collecting of works of art was an activity through which individuals could project a certain identity. As collectors vied with one another in flaunting their possessions and demonstrating their sophistication, painters were likewise engaged in intense competition in the field of production. I argue that the most enterprising Dutch painters created works that both facilitated the collector's display of cultural capital and asserted the value of their own artistic excellence. *The Cloth Shop* serves as a case study for exploring the ways in which collectors' and artists' interests intersected. The painting's elaborate execution and innovative imagery reflect the ambitious young artist's attempt at distinguishing his works from his competitors'. The circumstances of the creation and sale of the painting, on the other hand, reveal the opportunities for social networking offered by the practice of art collecting. The iconographic content and the formal characteristics both address the context in which the painting would have been viewed, as well as the practices surrounding the viewing process.

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Fig. 1 Frans van Mieris, *The Cloth Shop*, 1660, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (© KHM, Vienna)

INTERPRETING VAN MIERIS'S *CLOTH SHOP*

The Cloth Shop purports to represent the interior of a shop, a spacious and well-appointed room with bolts of fabric lining its walls. The opulence of the space is matched by two richly dressed figures in the foreground. A grinning man, clad in an officer's costume, fingers a sample of silk with his left hand and caresses the chin of a young woman with his right. She returns the officer's gaze and leans towards him, making clear the amorous nature of their interaction. At first glance, then, *The Cloth Shop* reads as yet another erotic encounter in a sumptuous interior, the kind that Dutch artists – including Van Mieris himself – made popular in the mid-seventeenth century. His *Duet*



Fig. 2 Frans van Mieris, *The Duet*, 1658, Staatliches Museum, Schwerin (photo credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY)

(1658), for example, presents an elegant couple playing music in luxurious surroundings (Fig. 2). The theme of courtship is conveyed through the invocation of music, a well-known pictorial metaphor for love. The idealized interior and the decorous interaction between the protagonists can also be seen in contemporary works by Gerard ter Borch and Gabriel Metsu. Yet a closer inspection of *The Cloth Shop* reveals that, unlike *The Duet*, the composition consists of an unconventional combination of motifs. The lavish setting bears little resemblance to actual shops in the seventeenth century, or indeed to conventional representations of shops in Dutch paintings. The young woman presents some cloth swatches to the officer, an act that would seem to

identify her as the storekeeper. Yet her elegant dress and the unusual characterization of the interior make her identity ambiguous. Also puzzling is the appearance of a seated old man in the recesses of the dim background. His dour expression contrasts with the lively exchange between the foreground figures, and his plain, coarse clothing makes him an anomalous presence in such ornate surroundings. Above this background figure hangs a painting depicting Adam and Eve mourning the death of Abel, a sombre biblical subject that seems at odds with the jocular character of the scene playing out between the young couple. The improbable setting, surprising juxtapositions, and shifts in tone all emphasize the painting as a highly artificial image.

Instead of treating *The Cloth Shop* as a coherent narrative with a hidden didactic message, this essay argues that the painting contains a collection of figural types and motifs that visually articulate the ideas of judgment and comparison. This approach to understanding the painting builds on, but is different from, the interpretive method pioneered by Eddy de Jongh in the 1960s that remains prevalent in the study of Dutch art. De Jongh's interpretation of genre paintings is based on the premise that deeper meaning is hidden beneath the illusionistic surface. The message of a painting – most often moralizing in nature – is to be decoded by viewers as they uncover the symbolic significance of seemingly mundane objects in the image.¹ In response, Svetlana Alpers proposed that instead of acting as ciphers, individual motifs visualize meanings in readily comprehensible form. Stereotypical figures and motifs acquire connotations in established pictorial conventions, so that they become accepted signifiers of specific concepts. Rather than positing concealed messages in a realistic representation, Alpers suggested that pictures created by assembling these signifiers often result in artificial and curious compositions.²

¹ Eddy de Jongh, *Tot lering en vermaak: betekenissen van Hollandse genrevoorstellingen uit de zeventiende eeuw* (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 1976), 53–54; Eddy de Jongh, 'To Instruct and Delight', in Michael Hoyle (ed.), *Questions of Meaning: Theme and Motif in Dutch Seventeenth-Century Painting* (Leiden: Primavera, 2000), 84–103. De Jongh drew on Erwin Panofsky's notion of 'disguised symbolism' in developing his interpretive approach. Panofsky initially formulated his ideas in discussing fifteenth-century religious paintings, which were more closely related to textual sources.

² This additive approach to creating compositions reflects the structural similarity between certain Dutch genre paintings and popular Dutch emblems. Since the pioneering work of De Jongh and J. A. Emmens in the 1960s, the use of emblems as an interpretive tool has yielded a richer understanding of Dutch paintings. More recent scholarship questions the various assumptions on which this method relies. Iconographers who trace motifs in paintings to similar ones in contemporary emblem books, then use the text of the emblems to decipher the visual elements, implicitly assume that meanings remained constant across different media. Scholars such as Alpers and Eric Jan Sluïjter argue for a more thorough consideration of the relationship between emblems and paintings in the period. Alpers proposes that more attention should be paid to the assemblage of visual motifs – which include text – in emblems and in paintings. See Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983), 229–33; Eric Jan Sluïjter, 'Didactic and Disguised Meaning? Several Seventeenth-Century Texts on Painting and the Iconographical Approach to Northern Dutch Paintings of the Period', in David Freedberg and Jan de Vries (eds.) *Art in History, History in Art: Studies in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Culture* (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and Humanities, 1991), 190–92.



Fig. 3 Jan Steen, *In Luxury, Look Out*, 1663. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (photo credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY)

The practice of assembling ‘visibly accessible meanings’ in the same pictorial space was a characteristic of the Netherlandish tradition.³ For example, Gerrit Dou – Van Mieris’s teacher – constructs an ambitious composition about deception in *The Quack*. Dou depicts stereotypical peasants and labourers acting out various proverbs about folly and deceit in a meticulously described yet ultimately fantastical setting. Van Mieris’s acquaintance Jan Steen likewise creates intricate compositions filled with symbolic motifs, of which *In Luxury, Look Out* can serve as an example (Fig. 3). Even though Steen has carefully rendered the appearance of each object and figure, the composition is a highly theatrical combination of enacted proverbs. Artists accumulate signifying elements in their paintings, but they do not always do so in a way that preserves narrative or even spatial coherence. Following traditional practice in using the additive approach to composition, Van Mieris has constructed a peculiar and conspicuously artificial image in *The Cloth Shop* by combining signifying motifs commonly found in different subjects.

³ Alpers, *Art of Describing*, 233.

It is unclear whether Van Mieris was commissioned by Leopold Wilhelm to paint *The Cloth Shop*, but judging by the elaborate nature of the piece, the artist would have expected to sell it to a prominent collector. *The Cloth Shop* is an ambitious work that features technical virtuosity and references different pictorial types. As such, its complexity could only have been fully appreciated by viewers who were knowledgeable about artistic traditions as well as personal styles of canonical artists. Visual evidence and textual sources suggest that Van Mieris generally targeted precisely this audience. Contemporary accounts of Van Mieris's life invariably stressed the exorbitant prices his paintings commanded, claims that are supported by evidence from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century inventories and auction catalogues.⁴ Moreover, the labour-intensive technique exhibited in surviving paintings by Van Mieris indicates that the painter expected to be rewarded for his skill and diligence.⁵ This means that his finest works would have been created exclusively for the affluent collectors. Inventorial evidence suggests that with a few exceptions, his highly polished paintings even became too expensive for buyers in his hometown of Leiden.⁶

Van Mieris's finely crafted cabinet pieces were aimed at a specific kind of viewer: the *liefhebber*. The *liefhebbers* became a distinctive and influential group in the Netherlandish art world at the turn of the seventeenth century. In the first decade of the century, the term was used to designate a new category of membership the Guild of St Luke in Antwerp.⁷ Zirka Filipczak has analyzed the language in the guild records and found that an individual who identified himself as a *liefhebber* did not register in order to deal in paintings, for he was distinguished from a *coopman der schilderijen* (a merchant or dealer of paintings).⁸ Instead, a major motivation for the *liefhebbers* to become members of the guild seems to be their desire for official recognition of their support of painters and their knowledge about art.⁹ Another indication of the influence

⁴ According to the information provided in Gerard Hoet's compilation of auction catalogues, the average price for a painting attributed to Van Mieris from 1687 to 1728 was about 340 guilders. Several of the paintings mentioned were valued at between 600 and 1100 guilders, showing the high market value of Van Mieris's works in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century. See Gerard Hoet, *Catalogus of naambyst van schilderyen, met derzelver pryzen*, 2 vols. (The Hague: Pieter Gerard van Baalen, 1752).

⁵ The most refined of Van Mieris's paintings, like Dou's, are so detailed and polished that it would have taken him or his best assistants considerable time to execute them. As Montias suggests, the investment of labour would have made it too risky for Van Mieris to produce such works entirely on speculation (John Michael Montias, 'Cost and Value in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art', *Art History* 10 (1987), 462). It is likely that the artist, through his contact with collectors, was reasonably confident that his pieces would sell.

⁶ Eric Jan Sluijter, 'Schilders van "cleyne, subtile ende curieuse dingen." Leidse "fijnschilders" in contemporaine bronnen', in Eric Jan Sluijter, et al. (eds.), *Leidse Fijnschilders* (Zwolle: Waanders, 1988), 39–40.

⁷ Zirka Z. Filipczak, *Picturing Art in Antwerp 1550–1700* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 51.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Elizabeth Alice Honig, *Painting and the Market in Early Modern Antwerp* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 202. The guild organized banquets, at which painters, *liefhebbers*, and dealers could meet and build connections.

of the *liefhebbers* in contemporary culture is their inclusion in series of portraits depicting renowned individuals in the Netherlands. For example, Anthony van Dyck's *Iconography* – the best known of such portrait series – grouped the individuals into three categories: princes and captains, statesmen and scholars, and artists and *liefhebbers*.¹⁰ It appears that art collecting, an activity that was associated with the social elite, was seen as a worthy pursuit by Flemish burghers who aspired to join the ranks of nobility in the early seventeenth century.¹¹ Although there are no records of official registration of *liefhebbers* with the Dutch guilds of St Luke before the middle of the century, the term can be found in guild documents and writings on painting.¹²

By the seventeenth century, the word *liefhebber* was used to describe collectors, connoisseurs, and supporters of the arts. As such, the term connotes not only financial status but also knowledge and discernment. It is my argument that the *liefhebber* was a cultural category, the social boundaries of which were more ambiguous, and possibly a matter of contestation. Seventeenth-century Netherlandish authors such as Karel van Mander and Philips Angel apply the term to an individual who not only owned a substantial quantity of paintings, but who also had a special interest in art.¹³ Out of the seventy-six owners of pictures he mentions by name in *Het Schilder-Boeck*, Van Mander characterizes twenty-three as *liefhebbers*. He refers to them more often and describes more of their paintings.¹⁴ Unlike some individuals who inherited the bulk of their collections, those designated by Van Mander as *liefhebbers* actively bought paintings, especially those by living artists. While *liefhebbers* clearly had to have a certain level of disposable income, their social background varied. For example, Van Mander applies the term to both amateur enthusiasts among Netherlandish burghers, and princes like Rudolf II. The practices of collecting and connoisseurship became means by which individuals' identities as *liefhebbers* were constructed and displayed.

¹⁰ Filipczak, *Picturing Art*, 52–3; Honig, *Painting and the Market*, 202. Filipczak points out that the *liefhebbers* included in the *Iconography* were identified as such without mention of their professions or businesses. This suggests that their support of the arts was the activity that qualified them for inclusion in this list of illustrious individuals.

¹¹ Filipczak, *Picturing Art*, 53–4.

¹² The 'guild letter' of the guild in The Hague, dated 21 October 1656, refers to *liefhebbers* alongside the categories of painters, sculptors, engravers, and glass engravers. All five were to pay the same dues to the *confrerie*, suggesting that *liefhebbers* had some official capacity in the organization. See Fr. D. O. Obreen, *Archief voor Nederlandsche kunstgeschiedenis*, 7 vols. (Rotterdam: J. van Baalen & Zonen, 1877–90), Vol. 4, 49. The Book of Confrerie of 21 July, 1661, states that *liefhebbers* were to be included in the fraternity, but specifically as *liefhebber* and not as *broeder* (Obreen, *Archief*, Vol. 4, 80).

¹³ Marten Jan Bok has investigated the social and economic circumstances of individuals designated by Van Mander as *liefhebbers* and found that they had substantial financial resources and occupied prominent social positions. Furthermore, Bok's analysis shows that a larger proportion of the paintings owned by *liefhebbers* were by living masters. See Marten Jan Bok, 'Art-Lovers and their Paintings: Van Mander's Schilder-boeck as a Source for the History of the Art Market in the Northern Netherlands', in Ger Luijten and Ariane van Suchtelen (eds.), *Dawn of the Golden Age: Northern Netherlandish Art 1580–1620* (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 1993), 143–7, Appendix II.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 141–3.

For *liefhebbers*, art collecting was a culturally and socially significant activity. One of the major interests of aristocratic collectors in early modern Europe was the acquisition of creations by canonical artists. That the Dutch patricians harboured a similar desire by the seventeenth century can be inferred from documentary evidence. Not only did the size of their collections grow in this period, but the proportion of attributed paintings in the inventories also rose.¹⁵ Moreover, paintings deemed to be 'originals' by specific artists fetched higher prices than 'copies' or anonymous works, indicating that authorship had become an important factor in determining the value of a painting.

An art collection worked as a symbol of social and cultural status only if it was known to other collectors and scholars. Patronage of the arts had long been regarded as an expression of power and culture, and princely courts had entertained visiting dignitaries with their *Wunder-* and *Kunstkammern* in the Renaissance.¹⁶ Even though he did not begin to collect on a large scale until he became the governor of the Southern Netherlands in 1646, Leopold Wilhelm – the eventual owner of *The Cloth Shop* – was recognized as a great *liefhebber* by mid-century.¹⁷ The archduke commissioned paintings of his collection from David Teniers the Younger, some of which were likely sent to

¹⁵ In his statistical analysis of a random sample of Amsterdam inventories, John Michael Montias finds that the average size of a collection doubled in 1650–60 compared to 1600–20. C. Willemijn Fock, focusing more explicitly on the high end of the Leiden market, also finds that individual collections became progressively larger in the course of the century. Fock derives a sample of twelve inventories per decade for a total of 120 inventories over the seventeenth century. The average number of paintings rose from 14.2 in 1600–09 to a peak of 116.2 in 1660–69, then moving to between 77.7 and 93.1 in the last three decades. See John Michael Montias, 'Works of Art in a Random Sample of Amsterdam Inventories', in Michael North (ed.), *Economic History and the Arts* (Köln: Böhlau, 1996), 77–9; C. Willemijn Fock, 'Kunstbeitz in Leiden in de 17de eeuw', in T. H. Lunsingh Scheurleer, C. Willemijn Fock, and A. J. van Dissel (eds.), *Het Rapenburg. Geschiednis van een Leidse gracht* (Leiden: Rijksuniversiteit Leiden, 1990), 4–5.

¹⁶ Beginning in the fifteenth century, princes and humanists justified the acquisition and display of splendour by articulating the doctrine of magnificence. Stemming from Aristotle's ideas, the theory of magnificence contends that expenditure on ceremony and the arts were a fitting occupation for rulers. For the relationship between art patronage and politics see, for example, Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Court, Cloister and City: The Art and Culture of Central Europe 1450–1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Elisabeth Scheicher, *Die Kunst- und Wunderkammern der Habsburger* (Vienna: Molden-Edition, 1979). On the role of collecting in diplomacy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, see Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Variations on the Imperial Theme in the Age of Maximilian II and Rudolf II* (New York: Garland, 1978), 103–23.

¹⁷ The archduke became active on the auction scene and managed to acquire the collection of the Duke of Hamilton, which formed the foundation of his famous Italian holdings. The inventory of Leopold Wilhelm's collection from 1659–60 also lists 880 paintings by German and Netherlandish artists. The descriptions of the seventy works by Dutch artists suggest a preference for the polished cabinet pieces executed in the 'fine' manner. Leopold Wilhelm shared a taste for such meticulously rendered pictures with many prominent collectors, making these works the most highly prized of Dutch paintings. Out of the 880 German and Netherlandish works, 330 were by artists active during the Archduke's governorship in the Netherlandish provinces. The seventy paintings attributed to Dutch artists included two paintings by Van Mieris and one by Dou. For discussion of Leopold Wilhelm's collection, see Karl Schütz, 'The Collection of Archduke Leopold Wilhelm', in Klaus Bussmann and Heinz Schilling (eds.), *1648: War and Peace in Europe* (Münster: Westfälisches Landesmuseum, 1999), 181–90; Renate Schreiber, *Ein galerie nach meinem humor: Erzherzog Leopold Wilhelm* (Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum, 2004), 89–129. For the inventory of the collection in 1659–1660, see Adolph Berger, 'Inventar der Kunstsammlung des Erzherzogs Leopold Wilhelm von Österreich', *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses* 1 (1883): LXXIX–CLXXVII.

other courts as gifts.¹⁸ In 1660, Teniers produced the *Theatrum Pictorium*, a series of 243 engravings after the Italian paintings in Leopold Wilhelm's possession. The fact that the catalogue was issued in four languages – Latin, French, Spanish, and Dutch – indicates the intention to propagate the image of the archduke as a great collector.¹⁹ By this time, prosperous burghers also sought to use artistic consumption to enhance their reputations. In one of the earliest published manuals of connoisseurship, *Sentimens sur la distinction des diverses manieres de peinture, dessein et graveure, et des originaux d'avec leurs copies* (1649), the engraver and author Abraham Bosse states that a collection of fine paintings could win the owner the admiration of other connoisseurs.²⁰

To own a particular object was only part of the project of demonstrating prestige and cultivation; the ability to discuss and evaluate it could be just as important. Constantijn Huygens, a member of the Dutch patrician class, explains in his memoir that his father Christiaan arranged for him to have drawing lessons and learn about paintings. The reason was that paintings were seen everywhere, and he wanted his son to be able to talk about them intelligently.²¹ Constantijn Huygens, secretary to the *stadhouder* Frederik Hendrik, was one of an increasing number of non-artists who wrote about art in the Low Countries and elsewhere.²² Connoisseurship manuals like Bosse's explain technical terms about painting and often contain a summary of contemporary art theory, indicating a demand for information on such matters.²³ These publications were popularizing books about the practices of collecting and connoisseurship aimed at a wider public who aspired to emulate *liefhebbers* like Leopold Wilhelm and Huygens.

A contemporary visual source about the activities that took place in a collection is the *Kunstkammer* or gallery picture. It has been well established that most of these pictures represent ideal rather than actual collections. Famous paintings known to have belonged to different individuals were often brought together in one imaginary room. Even in the rare instances when gallery paintings were based on existing collections, such as Willem van

¹⁸ Filipczak, *Picturing Art*, 62; Jonathan Brown, *Kings and Connoisseurs: Collecting Art in Seventeenth-Century Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1994), 178.

¹⁹ Brown, *Kings and Connoisseurs*, 180. Brown notes that those were 'the languages of the international art market'.

²⁰ Carol Gibson-Wood, 'Studies in the Theory of Connoisseurship from Vasari to Morelli', (Ph.D. dissertation, University of London, 1982), 49.

²¹ Constantijn Huygens, *Mijn jeugd*, trans. C. L. Heesakkers, 2nd edn. (Amsterdam: Querido, 1994), 70–71.

²² For example, Giulio Mancini, a medical doctor from Siena, wrote the *Considerazioni sulla pittura* (c. 1620), a text that addresses issues pertinent to connoisseurship. Cornelis de Bie, a notary, published *Het gulden cabinet* (*The Golden Cabinet*), a compilation of artists' biographies, in Antwerp in 1661. See Filipczak, *Picturing Art*, 56–7; Cornelis de Bie, *Het gulden cabinet van de edel vry schilderconst* (1661) (Soest: Davaco, 1971).

²³ Bosse's *Sentimens*, mentioned above, is an early example. In the chapter on painting his *Essay des merveilles de nature, et des plus nobles artifices* of 1632, Etienne Binet offers a number of sample expressions to praise a painter's ability to create illusionistic images. In Italy, Mancini's *Considerazioni* circulated in manuscript form. See Etienne Binet, *Essay des merveilles de nature, et des plus nobles artifices* (1632) (repr. Evreux: Des Opérations, 1987), 364–5. I thank Anna Tummers for bringing this text to my attention. For a discussion of Mancini and Bosse, see Gibson-Wood, 'Theory of Connoisseurship', 33–40, 44–58.



Fig. 4 Willem van Haecht, *The Cabinet of Cornelis van der Gheest*, 1628, Rubenshuis, Antwerp (Rubenshuis, Antwerpen © Collectiebeleid)

Haecht's *Cabinet of Cornelis van der Gheest* (Fig. 4) or David Teniers's representations of the Italian paintings in Leopold Wilhelm's possession, artists were known to alter the dimensions of individual pieces to create a pleasing arrangement in a palatial setting.²⁴ On the other hand, because they represent the ideal, gallery pictures help identify the artists whose works were coveted by collectors in the period. Moreover, gallery pictures offer insights into the practices that took place within substantial European collections. Paintings by Van Haecht and Teniers, for example, show figures gesticulating while looking at and talking about specific objects. Collections are thus presented as social spaces where informed viewers inspected, admired, and conversed about art.

Viewers who had access to a rich collection in seventeenth-century Europe were expected to be able to distinguish the different styles on display and to evaluate the quality of specific works. To possess a coveted painting like *The Cloth Shop* might show an individual's wealth, but to discuss its merits,

²⁴ Julius Held, 'Artis Pictoriae Amator: An Antwerp Art Patron and his Collection', in *Rubens and his Circle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 35–64; Filipczak, *Picturing Art*, 59; Brown, *Kings and Connoisseurs*, 153–7.

attribution, and innovative aspects would mark a viewer as a member of the exclusive circle of *liefhebbers*. In short, he had to exercise his judgment and confirm his taste in a social environment. ‘Taste’ in this context refers to a set of manifested preferences that, as Pierre Bourdieu explained, ‘classifies the classifier’.²⁵ When individuals make decisions in cultural consumption, their familiarity and agreement with specific criteria of excellence betray their positions in the social spectrum.²⁶ Art collecting and connoisseurship were the means by which individuals made their taste visible, that is, they could display their cultural capital by employing the symbolic language of distinction.

It would be an oversimplification to describe collecting solely as a tool to enhance one’s status, but it nevertheless had a function of ‘legitimizing social differences’.²⁷ This social dimension of the practice elucidates the significance of Houbraken’s account of the sale of *The Cloth Shop*. Several seventeenth- and eighteenth-century biographers have mentioned *The Cloth Shop* as a pivotal work in Van Mieris’s career. Von Sandrart singles out this painting as an exemplar of Van Mieris’s artistry, and reported that Leopold Wilhelm paid 2,000 guilders for it.²⁸ Houbraken corrects the figure to 1,000, which still would have been enough to pay Van Mieris’s annual rent in 1660.²⁹ In the Dutch Republic, where a simple landscape could sell for less than a guilder, these figures were astonishing indeed.³⁰ Houbraken specifies that it was through the favour of one Professor Sylvius that Van Mieris had the opportunity to make a painting for Archduke Leopold Wilhelm.³¹ Professor Sylvius was Franciscus de le Boe Sylvius, a renowned physician and professor of medicine at the University of Leiden. He was also a well-known collector who had a taste for the refined painting style of the Leiden *fijnschilders* (‘fine painters’).³² Dou

²⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 6.

²⁶ American economist Thorstein Veblen produced an extended study of the sociological implications of consumption in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Veblen’s model explains that conspicuous consumption of specific commodities conferred on members of the leisure class the visible distinction from those of lower economic and social status. See Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 31–40.

²⁷ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 6–7.

²⁸ Joachim von Sandrart, *Academie der Bau-, Bild- und Mahlerey-Künste von 1675*, ed. A. R. Peltzer (Munich: G. Hirth’s Verlag, 1925), 196. According to Houbraken, the archduke subsequently invited Van Mieris to be his court painter in Vienna, an offer that the young artist declined. See Arnold Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlandsche konstschilders en schilderessen (1753)* (facsimile ed. Amsterdam: Israel, 1976), III:3.

²⁹ Von Sandrart, *Academie (Peltzer 1925)*, 196; Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh*, III:3.

³⁰ Analyzing a sample of 120 inventories from Amsterdam in the 1640s (thirty-two of which were evaluated), the economic historian John Michael Montias calculated the average prices of paintings. The overall average was 6.8 guilders for 312 paintings of various sizes and attributions. See John Michael Montias, ‘Estimates of the number of Dutch master-painters, their earnings and their output in 1650’, *Leidschrift* 6 (1990): 59–74.

³¹ Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh*, III:3.

³² For the life and work of Sylvius, see E. D. Baumann, *Francois de le Boe Sylvius* (Leiden: Brill, 1949). For Sylvius’ collection, see Eric Jan Sluiter, ‘“All striving to adorne their houses with costly peeces”: Two Case Studies of Paintings in Wealthy Interiors’, in Mariët Westermann (ed.), *Art and Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2001), 105–16. The inventory of Sylvius’ household goods has been published

pioneered this meticulous approach to producing cabinet paintings in the 1630s and 40s, which was then imitated by his pupils and fellow genre painters in Leiden and beyond. Next to Dou, Van Mieris was the most celebrated *fijnschilder*. According to Houbraken, Sylvius paid Van Mieris an annual sum for the first choice of his works. In addition, Sylvius promised to match other collectors' offers for the artist's paintings.³³

Houbraken's assertion that it was thanks to Sylvius that Van Mieris sold the painting to Leopold Wilhelm could mean one of two things: either Sylvius knew of the archduke's interest and chose to forego the chance to buy the picture himself or he brokered the sale. Houbraken was writing forty years after the fact and he was known, like other biographers of the period, to embellish his accounts of artists' lives. What is of interest here, however, is the *kind* of interactions among the parties implied in his story. Houbraken's mention of Sylvius' involvement gives us a glimpse into the complex negotiations among artists and collectors in the second half of the seventeenth century. It also provides evidence of the role played by art collecting in social networking among the European elite at the time.³⁴ Van Mieris, as an artist who worked primarily for the elite circles, would have been aware of the physical and social environment of collecting and the expectations viewers had of paintings.

In the top layer of the art market, the exchanges between collectors and artists took place within a community defined by specific preferences, where Sylvius, an intellectual from a merchant family, could rub shoulders with nobility in his role as a *liefhebber*. This was a social sphere where individuals could turn their economic capital into cultural capital by virtue of their consumption patterns and the acquisition of intangible marks of prestige, including the requisite manners and knowledge about art.³⁵ Works of art played a crucial role in the arena where collectors claimed membership

in T. H. Lunsingh Scheurleer, *Het Rapenburg: Geschiedenis van een Leidse gracht*, Vol. IIIb (Leiden: Rijksuniversiteit Leiden, 1988), 335–42.

³³ Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh*, III:3.

³⁴ Sylvius also met Cosimo III de' Medici in 1669, when the future Grand Duke of Tuscany visited Leiden. Otto Naumann suggests that Sylvius or Florentius Schuyt, another famous scientist at the University of Leiden, might have introduced Van Mieris to Cosimo. See G. J. Hoogewerff, *De twee reizen van Cosimo de Medici Prins van Toscane door de Nederlanden (1667–1669). Journalen en Documenten* (Amsterdam: Muller, 1919), 35; Otto Naumann, *Frans van Mieris the Elder (1635–1681)* (Doornspijk: Davaco, 1981), Vol. 1, 27, 137–8. There are records of contact between Netherlandish collectors and foreign princes or their agents by the late sixteenth century. For example, Van Mander writes that Jacob Rauwert, an 'outstanding lover of art' in Amsterdam, helped Count Simon von Lippe acquire paintings on the art market. Von Lippe was acting as Emperor Rudolf II's agent at the time. Pieter Isaacsz and Francois Badens, both *liefhebbers* mentioned by Van Mander, helped Jonas Charisius buy works on the Antwerp market for the Danish king Christian IV. These can be seen as instances of local wealthy *liefhebbers* assisting princely collectors in their quest for masterpieces. See Karel van Mander, *Het Schilder-boeck* (1604), 204v, 213v, 238v; Karel van Mander, *The Lives of the Illustrious Netherlandish and German Painters, from the first edition of the Schilder-boeck (1603–1604)*, trans. Hessel Miedema, Vol. 1 (Doornspijk: Davaco, 1994), 76–7, 113, 213; Bok, 'Art-Lovers', 148–50.

³⁵ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 65ff; Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities: Paris and Venice, 1500–1800*, trans. Elizabeth Wiles-Portier (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 39–41.

among the cultural elite, and ambitious artists painting for this audience created works that fulfilled that function.

THE CLOTH SHOP: AN INVITATION TO COMPARE

A collection was thus a site where a *liefhebber's* taste was made visible as he inspected and conversed about diverse art objects with other sophisticated viewers. The physical conditions of display – a dense pattern of hanging, juxtapositions of different genres, styles, subjects – encouraged viewers to draw connections among the paintings present. Since it had become a social custom in the seventeenth century for individuals with the requisite credentials to visit renowned collections, viewers could even draw on their memory in identifying citations and variations.³⁶ In this way they could demonstrate their knowledge that they were assumed to have cultivated through a long period of exposure to art. Artists too could assert their superiority by asking viewers to consider their work against those by other artists.

Van Mieris addresses these acts of judging and comparing in *The Cloth Shop*. Among the pile of fabrics on the table at the right is a standard that bears a partially legible Latin inscription: 'COMPARAT CUI VULT'. As De Jongh demonstrated, the first word is most likely a form of the verb *comparare*, which could mean 'to compare' or 'to purchase'.³⁷ Either of these translations could describe the interaction between the two principal figures on the left, their physical contact and facial expressions leading the viewer to surmise that the officer is comparing, and eventually could purchase, both the silk and the young woman. Although most scholars have followed De Jongh in identifying the inscription as the 'key' to understanding the picture, it is worth noting that the text actually does not explain the moralizing content of the encounter between the officer and the young woman. The words do not warn or reprimand, but simply point to the officer's action in written form. Moreover, Van Mieris depicts the text as part of a crafted object, underscoring its status as an integral component of the visual image. Rather than a commentary or explanation, the inscription can be seen as a form of representation that is parallel to, but distinct from, the figural motif.

The background elements, which seem so incongruous in appearance and tone to the foreground scene, likewise address the theme of judgment. As mentioned earlier, the elderly man seems out of the place in the refined room. He does serve, however, as a foil to the dashing officer. The latter's

³⁶ For the reception of guests in princely collections, see footnote 16 above. There is evidence that prominent collections and artists' studios in Dutch towns became attractions for gentlemen travellers. Authors such as Von Sandrart and Balthasar de Monconys, the French diplomat and scholar, wrote of visiting well-known private collections in Leiden and Rotterdam. See Von Sandrart, *Academie (Peltzer 1925)*, 195–6; Balthasar De Monconys, *Journal des voyages . . . enrichi de quantité de figures en taille-douce des lieux et des choses principales* (Lyon: H. Boissat et G. Remeus, 1665–1666), II, 131ff; Fock, 'Kunstbezit in Leiden', 3.

³⁷ De Jongh, *Tot lering en vermaak*, 173–4.

robust physique and erect posture contrast with the old man's stooping pose, a juxtaposition that calls to mind the contrast between old age and youth. The old man is positioned directly in front of the fireplace, the reddish glow of the embers reflected on the brass sphere to his left. His overall presentation thus recalls the personification of winter.³⁸ Because winter was also understood as a metaphor for the waning stages of human life, its invocation reinforces the difference in age between the two male figures. The old man's costume, which, in keeping with traditional representations of winter, consists of dull cloth and pelt, stands in stark contrast to the fine embroidered black coat and feathered hat worn by the officer. The peculiar presence of the old man prompts viewers to draw on their knowledge of established iconography and to consider the meaning of his inclusion.

The biblical subject of the painting hanging above the fireplace is also centred on a comparison, namely, God's judgment of Cain's and Abel's respective faith. The Book of Genesis recounts that God looked favourably upon Abel's offering but not on Cain's. In a fit of jealous rage, Cain murdered his brother.³⁹ In addition to the figures and the inscription, the painting within the painting becomes yet another way to signify the themes of judgement and comparison, this time in the form of a biblical narrative. The juxtaposition of an amorous genre scene, an allegorical figure, an inscription, and a history painting invites viewers to admire Van Mieris's mastery of the different modes of picturing in the Dutch tradition, as well as his ingenuity and daring in combining these in one picture.

If the assembly of motifs in *The Cloth Shop* thematizes the acts of judging and comparing, the manner of paintings also asks viewers to make a series of comparisons: between the different textures simulated in paint, between the rendered objects and their counterparts in the physical world, and between Van Mieris's innovative treatment of the genre scene and the established pictorial subjects from which he drew. In other words, in addition to the symbolic meanings of individual objects and figures, the way these elements are characterized and executed contributes to the generation of meaning.

In the spirit of competition among the arts, *The Cloth Shop* encourages viewers to compare the rendering of luxuriant textures of the simulated textiles. The placement of the inscription, found among the arrangement of fabrics in the right foreground, is telling. The tiny words appear as embroidery on the standard, with the folds revealing and interrupting the sequence of

³⁸ Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia* (1603) (facsimile ed. Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1970), 475–76. Ripa specifies that winter was represented as a white-haired old man or woman, dressed in cloth and pelt, shown eating at a laid table and warming him- or herself by a fire. It is more common in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Netherlandish art for winter to take the form of an old man warming his hands before a fire. See Wayne Franits, *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth Century Dutch Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 166–9; Ilja M. Veldman, 'Seasons, Planets and Temperaments in the Work of Maarten van Heemskerck: Cosmo-Astrological Allegory in Sixteenth-Century Netherlandish Prints', *Simiolus* 11 (1980): 151–63.

³⁹ Genesis 4:1–4, 16.

letters. As viewers move closer to the picture surface to read the fragmented text, they become aware of the diverse materials assembled in this small area in the painting. Covering the table is a Turkish carpet that Van Mieris renders with short parallel strokes to imitate the weave. He switches to thin glazes to distinguish the silky sheen of the green standard from the matte appearance of the wool carpet. His meticulous and smooth brushwork evokes the textures of threads and cloth, presenting a persuasive fiction that the standard was carefully observed and faithfully replicated in paint. There is variation within this motif too, for the highlights on the embroidery are described with more opaque marks. Van Mieris again uses a combination of translucent glazes and thicker highlights, with minute brushstrokes left visible in places, for the gleaming silks lying on top of the standard. A range of brushwork is thus used to articulate the diverse textures, leading viewers to replicate the officer's action as they compare and evaluate the proffered products – Van Mieris's elaborate pictorial illusions.

Van Mieris's art exemplifies the illusionistic prowess of the *fijnschilders*, who were popular among collectors of Dutch painting in the second half of the seventeenth century.⁴⁰ Dutch textual discussions about painting in this period repeatedly stressed the ability of painting to imitate, even surpass, nature.⁴¹ Angel's *Lof der Schilderconst*, for example, states that the goal of the painter was to capture the eye of the *liefhebber* with convincing pictorial fictions. As a lecture delivered to the community of Leiden painters who were seeking to establish a Guild of St Luke, the text reflects the prevalent ideas about the art of painting in Van Mieris's hometown in the middle of the century.⁴² Angel explains that good paintings seduced the *liefhebber's* eye with a 'decorative richness' and a natural arrangement of illusionistically simulated objects.⁴³ Angel's criteria for good painting – such as the proper rendering of light and shadow, observation of the properties of objects, and knowledge of perspective and proportion – revealed the value he placed on the imitation of the visible world. Angel extolls Dou as the exemplary artist who had achieved the balance between *net* (literally 'neat') finish and 'nimble, sweet-flowing

⁴⁰ Wayne Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting: Its Stylistic and Thematic Evolution* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 97; Peter Hecht, *De Hollandse fijnschilders van Gerard Dou tot Adriaen van der Werff* (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 1989); Eric Jan Sluijter, *Leidse fijnschilders van Gerrit Dou tot Frans van Mieris de Jonge 1630–1760* (Zwolle: Waanders, 1988), 15–55.

⁴¹ Peter Hecht, 'There's no problem enjoying it, but the meaning is tricky', in Jeroen Giltaij (ed.), *Senses and Sins: Dutch Painters of Daily Life in the Seventeenth Century* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2004), 94ff; Sluijter, 'Didactic and Disguised Meaning', 187–90.

⁴² Eric Jan Sluijter, 'In Praise of Painting: On Paintings by Gerrit Dou and a Treatise by Philips Angel of 1642', in *Seductress of Sight: Studies in Dutch Art of the Golden Age* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2000), 201.

⁴³ Philips Angel, *Lof der Schilderconst (1642)* (facsimile ed. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam, 1972), 39. Karel van Mander has already discussed the importance of 'abundance' (*copia*) and 'variety' (*varietas*) in composing a history painting. However, Van Mander also warns against superfluous details, and added that some of the best painters chose to minimize details in their compositions. Angel does not follow his predecessor in offering such a qualified recommendation. See Karel Van Mander, *Den grondt der edel vry schilderconst*, ed. Hessel Miedema (Utrecht: Haentjens Dekker & Gumbert, 1973), 5:25–6.

brushwork'.⁴⁴ The 'fine' technique practiced by Dou and Van Mieris – whom the former called the 'prince' of his pupils – was thus seen in Leiden as an ideal way to imitate nature. The detailed surface descriptions by the two masters captivated their viewers, compelling them to prolong their inspection of the paintings.

The choice of a cloth shop as subject was fitting for a painter seeking to demonstrate his technical proficiency, since the depiction of drapery was recognized as a test of the painter's skill in the seventeenth-century. Van Mander, for example, discusses at length the rendering of drapery in the *Grondt*, his didactic poem from 1604. The author advises the painter to strengthen highlights in the 'glittering cloth' and to arrange the colours for harmonious effect.⁴⁵ Near the end of *Lof der Schilderkonst*, Angel states that a good painter must be able to:

... make a proper distinction between silk, velvet, wool and linen stuffs. ... A painter worthy of praise should be able to render this variety in the most pleasing way for all eyes with his brushwork, distinguishing between harsh, rough clothiness and smooth, satiny evenness ...⁴⁶

All these textures can be seen not only in the still-life arrangement on the table, but also in the costumes of the three figures. The soft feathers along the brim of the officer's hat, the brilliant gold sword belt across his black coat, the soft fur lining the woman's Dutch jacket, her gleaming white satin skirt – these sumptuous materials stand in contrast to the dull cloth worn by the old man in the shadows. As the officer compares the luxuriant cloth and the softness of the woman's skin, a silk ribbon dangles from her left hand and touches his left wrist. These passages in the painting thus draw attention to the painter's ability to evoke the sense of touch and the sensuality of the encounter. Given the emphasis on the dexterity required to paint lifelike drapery, *The Cloth Shop* provides a commentary on Van Mieris's painterly excellence in two ways. First, Van Mieris effaces his brushstrokes, achieving a 'neat' finish that sustains the illusionism of the image down to the tiniest detail. Second, the imagery of fine fabrics itself evokes the association of artistic virtuosity. The artist's craftsmanship is visually demonstrated *and* signified through the strategic deployment of motifs.

If the spotlight on cloth has special relevance to issues of artistic value in the Dutch Republic, what is the significance of Van Mieris's staging of the scene in a shop? Dou was a pioneer in developing the representation of shops.⁴⁷ From the 1640s to the 1670s, Dou produced several paintings of grocery shops, each

⁴⁴ Angel, *Lof der Schilderkonst*, 55–6. For translation see Hessel Miedema and Michael Hoyle, 'Philips Angel, *Praise of Painting*', *Simiolus* 24 (1996): 248.

⁴⁵ Van Mander, *Grondt*, 10:18–19.

⁴⁶ Angel, *Lof der Schilderkonst*, 55; Miedema and Hoyle, 'Philips Angel, *Praise of Painting*', 248.

⁴⁷ Ronni Baer, 'The Life and Art of Gerrit Dou', in *Gerrit Dou: Master Painter in the Age of Rembrandt* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2001), 39; Elizabeth Alice Honig, 'Counting Out Their Money.



Fig. 5 Gerrit Dou, *The Grocer's Shop*, 1647, Musée du Louvre, Paris (photo credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY)

seen through a monumental stone window. In Dou's distinctive scheme, brightly illuminated figures of the vendor and customers standing just behind the window are juxtaposed with other figures and objects deep in pictorial space (Fig. 5). A diverse range of goods is either neatly placed on wall shelves

Money and Representation in the Early Modern Netherlands', *Leidschrift* 13 (1998): 49ff. There have been portrayals of artisans and merchants in shops in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but Dou was responsible for formulating the conventions for depicting interactions between vendors and customers in these spaces.

or strategically positioned on the window ledge. Dou's constructed image became a conventional way to represent shops in Dutch genre painting, even if this did not replicate reality.

For *The Cloth Shop*, Van Mieris borrows his teacher's template, lining part of the back wall with merchandise. This choice establishes the space as a commercial one, where goods are displayed and sold. On one level, the mercantile setting can be seen as commenting on the nature of the interaction between the amorous couple. Their behaviour is certainly contrary to the courtship etiquette described in visual and textual form at the mid-century.⁴⁸ But the man is not just making sexual advances. His action is also one of judgment of desirability, an act that is in turn a playful allusion to the relationship between the viewer and the painting.

The shop is a specific kind of space that implies the mediated exchange of commodities. Elizabeth Honig has posited that Dou's depictions of grocery shops could be seen as the artist's attempt to assert the value of his work amidst the uncertainties in a complex art market.⁴⁹ Van Mieris's painting, like Dou's, challenges the viewer to recognize its 'true' worth. The officer's comparison of the silk and the woman thematizes this concern. Recall that the inscription can also be read as an invitation to purchase. The pun again finds its pictorial parallel in the officer's action, as he seems likely to acquire both the fabric and the woman's affection. Playing on the well-established analogy between the desire for art and erotic desire, Van Mieris draws a connection between the seductiveness of the young woman and the polished allure of his own painting.

ALLUSIONS AND VARIATIONS

For Van Mieris's sophisticated audience, *The Cloth Shop* alludes to, but distinguishes itself from, two fashionable pictorial types. Although Van Mieris borrows some of Dou's motifs to designate his setting as a shop, the character of his space differs significantly from Dou's. While Dou sets his grocery stores behind a window and compresses the space, Van Mieris here showcases his skill at creating an expansive room through the distribution of light and shadows. Moreover, instead of the dense display of merchandise favoured by Dou, the fabric bolts in *The Cloth Shop* take up only half of the back wall. The other half is given over to the ornate fireplace and the large history painting above the mantel. These features are more commonly found in the idealized elegant homes described in the work of Ter Borch in the 1650s.

Ter Borch's so-called *Curiosity* (Fig. 6), now in New York, was completed around the same time as Van Mieris's *Cloth Shop*, and there are similarities between the settings of the two paintings. Each room features an affluent

⁴⁸ Franits, *Paragons of Virtue*, 57–61.

⁴⁹ Honig, 'Counting out their Money': 49–52.



Fig. 6 Gerard ter Borch, 'Curiosity', c. 1660, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (© The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

ambience with a mixture of luxuriant materials, lavish fireplace, and an unlikely chandelier.⁵⁰ Like *The Cloth Shop*, Ter Borch's picture addresses the theme of love, albeit in a very different manner. The young woman seated at the centre of the composition engages in letter writing, one of the increasingly popular cultural activities in the seventeenth-century Republic. The

⁵⁰ Fock's research into the inventories of prestigious households in Amsterdam, Leiden, and The Hague indicates that brass chandeliers were intended for churches and public buildings, and were very rare in private homes. C. Willemijn Fock, 'Semblance or Reality? The Domestic Interior in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting', in Mariët Westermann (ed.), *Art and Home: Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2001), 95–6.

epistolary theme, like music, became a metaphor for love and courtship in contemporary genre paintings.⁵¹ Both the letter writer and the standing figure on the left are presented as beautiful ladies of marriageable age, their features rendered with soft, smooth brushwork. Each figure wears an exquisite costume, the highlight being the glittering white satin skirt (Ter Borch's trademark feature) on the standing young woman. Ter Borch adds a light-hearted touch with the young girl on the right, who tries to steal a peek at the letter. The overall tone, however, is one of restrained elegance, with the female figures ensconced in a domestic setting with no sign of male presence, and love expressed through the mediation of writing. Van Mieris draws on, but at the same time transforms, the popular courtship pictures in *The Cloth Shop*. The rituals of decorous love have been replaced by the overtly erotic exchange between the officer and the young woman. Ter Borch describes selective focal points, such as the figures, in great detail while rendering secondary elements in a more summary fashion. Van Mieris departs from this approach and brings all parts of the painting to a level of polished resolution, thereby distinguishing his work from Ter Borch's in formal terms.

Not only does the setting of *The Cloth Shop* resemble the idealized burgher's home in numerous genre paintings, but the young woman – with her satin skirt, ermine-lined jacket, and white cap – also recalls the housewives in the works of mid-century genre painters like Ter Borch, Gabriel Metsu, and Nicolaes Maes. As Alpers and Honig have argued, many of the mid-century genre paintings appealed to viewers with their probing of gender categories as well as illusionistic execution.⁵² As social norms and relations were being formulated in the young Republic, domesticity became an important concept in Dutch ideology. Popular authors such as Jacob Cats characterized the home as a microcosm of the state, where virtues of piety and modesty must be preserved by female guardians.⁵³ The image of a burgher's home was thus constructed as a realm separate from the external world, where men laboured to support the family. This description of a domestic interior as a feminized space was a well established trope in Netherlandish painting by the 1650s.

In reality, however, the boundary between home and world was much more fluid, and the tension between theory and practice was a theme that painters explored. For example, Maes' *Eavesdropper* (Fig. 7), now in Dordrecht, literally positions the housewife between two worlds: the genteel burgher household

⁵¹ Alpers, *Art of Describing*, 192–207; Peter C. Sutton, 'Love Letters: Dutch Genre Paintings in the Age of Vermeer', in *Love Letters: Dutch Genre Paintings in the Age of Vermeer* (Greenwich, CT: Bruce Museum of Arts and Science, 2003), 14–49.

⁵² Svetlana Alpers, 'Picturing Dutch Culture', in Wayne Franits (ed.), *Looking at Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art: Realism Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 57–67; Elizabeth Alice Honig, 'The Space of Gender in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting', in Franits (ed.), *Looking at Dutch Art*, 187–201.

⁵³ Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (London: Fontana Press, 1991), 378–91.



Fig. 7 Nicolaes Maes, *The Eavesdropper*, 1657. © Dordrechts Museum, Dordrecht (Loan Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage, Rijswijk/Amsterdam)

upstairs and the potentially corrupt realm of the maid downstairs.⁵⁴ Maes emphasizes the affinity between the mistress and the maid by presenting both as youthful figures. Instead of making a clear admonitory gesture, the housewife wears an amused expression and raises a finger to her lips, inviting viewers to spy on the flirtation between the maid and the soldier in the kitchen below. As Alpers has maintained, Maes's paintings do not so much warn against immoral behaviour as register the tensions within the constructed social categories.

Van Mieris participates in this exploration of gender roles in *The Cloth Shop*. His treatment of the female figure seems at first more explicit than those in the paintings by Ter Borch and Maes. Injecting a dose of ribald humour, Van Mieris shows the young woman compliantly smiling and gazing at the officer. By incorporating Dou's iconography of commercial activity, however, Van Mieris makes the identity of the woman even harder to categorize: she is dressed as the lady of the house, she acts as a storekeeper, and her response to the officer suggests that she is also a commodity for sale. The resulting ambiguity adds to the titillating character of the painting. By citing established subjects – the shop and the elegant interior – in creating this ambitious work,

⁵⁴ Alpers, 'Picturing Dutch Culture', 62–3; Martha Hollander, *An Entrance for the Eyes: Space and Meaning in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (Berkeley: University of California, 2002), 103–06.

Van Mieris underscores his inventive strategy and prompts viewers to compare his own accomplishment to his compatriots'.

INNOVATION AND EMULATION

In *The Cloth Shop*, Van Mieris emphasizes his own ingenuity and technical virtuosity by engaging the older masters Dou and Ter Borch in an artistic dialogue. If the painting constituted a performance by the artist, it was also an occasion for viewers to perform their shared identity as connoisseurs. *The Cloth Shop* draws from multiple models and relies on viewers to recognize its various sources. Within the discourse of artistic invention of the time, Van Mieris is engaging in a form of competitive imitation, referred to as emulation.⁵⁵ By calling attention to his borrowings, the artist asks viewers to compare the present work to his models. The process rewards viewers who had the competence not only to identify the sources, but also to evaluate the relative merits of the new and old creations. Recognizable citations work especially well within the context of collecting, where connoisseurs are familiar with learned discourses of creation and imitation. Moreover, in the physical environment of display, artists could structure a viewing experience by encouraging viewers to draw visual and thematic connections among paintings housed in the same room or among several collections.⁵⁶

The Cloth Shop contains clues that call attention to Van Mieris's aspirations. The standard bearing the inscription about comparison also features other symbolic motifs. At the top is a lion in an oval cartouche, next to which is *putto* with blue feathers in a fan-like pattern behind him. Together these form the coat of arms of Holland. Under this arrangement is the shield of Leiden, with crossed keys on a shield flanked by two lions. A string of letters – GDUNUM – can be seen along the border. As De Jongh has convincingly argued, the standard is folded in such a way that suggests this is an incomplete word. Given its placement, it might presumably read [LU]GDUNUM [BATAVORUM], the Roman name of the city of Leiden. This part of the standard, then, refers to

⁵⁵ For imitation as discussed in seventeenth-century Dutch texts, see J. D. P. Warners, 'Translatio-imitatio-aemulatio (Imitatio)', *De nieuwe taalgids* 50 (1957): 82–8. For a more general discussion of early modern theories of imitation, see G. W. Pigman, 'Versions of Imitation in the Renaissance', *Renaissance Quarterly* 33 (1980): 1–32; Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), 38–48. For imitation in early modern art see, for example, Elizabeth Cropper, *The Domenichino Affair: Novelty, Imitation, and Theft in Seventeenth-Century Rome* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005); Maria H. Loh, 'New and Improved: Repetition as Originality in Italian Baroque Practice and Theory', *Art Bulletin* 86 (2004): 477–504; Mark A. Meadow, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder's Netherlandish Proverbs and the Practice of Rhetoric* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2002), 99–102; Eric Jan Sluijter, 'Over "rapen" en wedjiver in de Nederlandse schilderkunst van de zeventiende eeuw', *De zeventiende eeuw* 21 (2005): 267–91.

⁵⁶ Inventories and auction catalogues from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries show that it was common for collectors to own paintings of similar descriptions by different painters. Sylvius, for example, possessed paintings of young women and tronies by Dou and Van Mieris (Lunsingh Scheurleer, *Het Rapenburg*) Vol. IIIb (336–38).

Van Mieris's hometown.⁵⁷ Some scholars have maintained that the opulence of the depicted space was meant to leave Leopold Wilhelm with an impression of Dutch prosperity and, in particular, of the famed textile industry of Leiden.⁵⁸ The problem is that there is no corroborating evidence within the painting itself to support such a specific argument. The tone of the illuminated foreground scene, with a leering officer flirting with a young woman, does not lend itself to the purpose of glorifying either the Republic or Leiden. Instead, the invocation of place could be a reference to the artist's identity and artistic lineage. Even though designations such as the Leiden school were categories devised by modern art historians, a sense of regional achievement was evident in the seventeenth century. The impetus for authors to count artists among the illustrious individuals in a town suggests that artistic accomplishments were a source of pride for an urban community.⁵⁹ Moreover, Van Mieris could well have been eager to evoke his association with Dou, one of the most famous Dutch masters of the period. The arms of Holland and Leiden are thus doubly self-referential, providing information about the artist's origins and his professional pedigree. The use of these symbolic devices also brings to mind the achievements of Dutch painting and situates Van Mieris within its tradition.

In *The Cloth Shop*, then, Van Mieris underscores his own accomplishments in terms of skill and ingenuity by openly engaging other artists' works. This practice of emulation was a viable strategy given the expectations fostered through the practice of collecting. Although defined as a set of preferences shared by members of a particular social group, 'taste' is not a static phenomenon. If cultural consumption erects boundaries between social groups, however, it could also be employed to challenge those boundaries.⁶⁰ Excluded groups with sufficient resources could buy the coveted paintings and learn to participate in the discourse of art. The popularizing manuals mentioned earlier, which began to appear in the second half of the seventeenth century, testified to the desire of a wider range of classes to acquire the knowledge – or at least the appearance of possessing the knowledge – about painting. The demand for these manuals reveals the constructed character of taste, suggesting that social boundaries defined through the display of taste were therefore fluid and contested. To maintain their cultural superiority, *liefhebbers* had to demonstrate their ability to make ever finer distinctions and to appreciate

⁵⁷ De Jongh, *Tot lering en vermaak*, 173.

⁵⁸ See, for example, *ibid.*; Linda Stone-Ferrier, *Images of Textiles: The Weave of 17th Century Dutch Art and Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1985), 267 n. 28; Wayne Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting: Its Stylistic and Thematic Evolution* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 281 n. 98.

⁵⁹ For example, Jan Orlers' description of the Leiden includes artists among the illustrious men of the city. Simon van Leeuwen's brief history of Leiden, published in 1672, likewise refers to famous native artists. See Baer, 'Life and Art', 26–7; Sluijter, 'cleyne, subtile ende curieuse dingen', 15–17; Eric Jan Sluijter, 'Jan van Goyen als marktleder, virtuoos en vernieuwer', in Christian Vogelaar (ed.), *Jan van Goyen* (Leiden: Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal, 1996), 38.

⁶⁰ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 65–92, 283–95.

increasingly subtle variations on accepted preferences. A work like *The Cloth Shop*, with its multiple allusions, offered the opportunity for *liefhebbers* to do just that.

It would, of course, be simplistic to assume that social contestation within the practice of collecting directly moulded artists' pictorial strategies, yet because of their contacts with *liefhebbers*, the most enterprising artists, such as Van Mieris, would have been aware of the display conditions and the rituals that took place within collections. At the same time, by creating skilful works that refer to their own status as exquisite objects of artifice, artists were able to shape and encourage those viewing practices. Because of the possibility that cultural consumption could be employed to challenge as well as to define social boundaries, tastes would have to be continually reaffirmed or redefined. For his prospective audience, which comprised the wealthiest collectors, Van Mieris provided not only skill and inventiveness that conformed to current standards, but also an innovative creation that offered surprises.

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