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## *Painted Words in Dutch Art of the Seventeenth Century*

EDDY DE JONGH

The last decades have witnessed a heated debate concerning the meaning and hierarchy of the two main elements of works of art, form and content, particularly in the field of seventeenth-century Dutch art.<sup>1</sup> The discussion has brought to bear a variety of viewpoints, which, roughly speaking, can be divided into two tendencies. To use the two simple designations which were employed with relative frequency by earlier generations of art historians, in one, attention to the 'how' of the work of art predominates, while in the other it is the 'what' that matters. For example, forty years ago Jan Steen's *Girl Eating Oysters* (FIG. 1) prompted the following consideration: 'We must remember that a painting as a work of art is never important for the "what", but only for the "how".'? In fact, this was a credo.



FIGURE 1 Jan Steen, *Girl eating oysters*. Mauritshuis. The Hague.

The recent discussion has arisen partly because of the great success achieved by the protagonists of the 'what' approach, that is, the iconologists. The iconological method had managed to clarify much about the meaning, background and function of works of art, particularly seventeenth-century Dutch art. Naturally, there is no consensus as to how iconology should be interpreted and applied. However, it can be said that those advocating this method willingly look for the quintessence of the work of art in its underlying ideas and in iconographic and cultural definitions.

Critical iconologists argued that one-sided attention to the 'how', that is, style, colour, composition, proportion and expression, brings about a distortion of historical perspective. After all, the seventeenth-century artist and his clientele themselves attached great value to the subject matter of paintings, or even more, to what that subject implied in terms of symbolic and cultural interrelationships. This can be primarily determined on the basis of circumstantial evidence. In his *Nuttige tijd-korter !00r reizende en andere luiden* (loosely translated: 'A useful way for travellers to pass the time') of 1663, the preacher Franciscus Ridderus expressed an opinion undoubtedly shared by many, namely that 'paintings should not be judged by the figures they contain! but in terms of the art itself! and the nice meanings.' 'Nice' should here be understood as clever or inventive.<sup>3</sup>

Fifteen years ago, however, the undisturbed progress of the iconologists was rudely interrupted by the appearance of the self-consciously polemical book by the American art historian Svetlana Alpers. *The art of describing*.<sup>4</sup> According to her, the meaning and the essence of a painting must be sought exclusively in the visual means and their applications, and not in abstract ideas. This is a viewpoint which is logically related to Alpers' conception of seventeenth-century Dutch culture as a typically visual one. She considers the iconological approach to the art arising from that culture to be more or less irrelevant. By drastically sweeping away iconology in favour of the primacy of visual means, Alpers established a hierarchy between artistic design and the content of works of art, which she regards as an historical fact. I dare say that Pastor Ridderus, quoted above, would have thought that strange, and in doing so I reveal something of my own view.

We do not know exactly what Alpers would say about Sreen's *Girl Eating Oysters*, but we do have her interpretation of a masterpiece painted a few years earlier, a *Self-Portrait and vanitas Still Life* by David Bailly from 1651 (Fig. 2). Here I will only touch upon her interpretation, as it clearly exposes the contrast to the obvious iconological explanation of Bailly's painting.<sup>5</sup>

In Alpers' view, this picture concerns things which materially demonstrate their properties, their nature, analogous to what she dubbed 'Baconian ambitions'. The philosopher Francis Bacon wrote: 'I admit nothing, but on the faith of the eyes' - albeit after the necessary empirical experience. It is the realm of craft, Alpers suggests, which enables us to understand nature. Bailly wanted to show us a dazzling mixture of artistic creativity and artistic illusion, an intention closely informed by Bacon's philosophy.

Even those who are not surprised by this claim and do not question whether Bailly was familiar with Bacon's writings, will at the very least want to know the meaning of the painting's ostentatious *oanisas* character. The many objects, including the skull and hourglass, the air bubbles, the text from *Proverbs* (*Vanitas vanitanun et omnia vaniras*), together with



FIGURE 2 David Bailly, *Self-portrait with vanitas still life* (1651). Stedelijk Museum 'de Lakenhal', Leiden.

the two self-portraits of Bailly as a youth and as an old man, are difficult to understand as anything other than a traditional statement of man's mortality.

However, in Alpers' view, matters are not so simple. The abundant references to mortality are supposed only to refer to the material of the painting itself. According to Alpers, the actual message communicated by the image is the display and enjoyment of craft as 'a version of a Baconian experiment', whereby the artist recognises only secondarily that his creation is subject to transience.

### How to Read a Genre Scene

A few years after the appearance of *The art of describing*, a younger generation of art historians began to criticise iconology. While these scholars did not follow in Alpers' footsteps, they too shifted the focus of attention from problems of meaning to those of design and material expression. Some of them also raised objections to the premise of many iconologists, namely that seventeenth-century art had a didactic and paradoxically obscuring character."

A problematic aspect of the debate is that there are no seventeenth-century writings on artistic theory in which the meaning of genre scenes, portraits, still lifes and landscapes are discussed in any kind of detail. This fact was not ignored in the polemic. If, as the

iconologists argue, the content of genre scenes and other categories of painting was considered so important by contemporaries, why - runs a favourite question of the critics - do we hardly find anything about this in theoretical treatises?"

An appropriate answer to this is, in my view, that the theoreticians concentrated predominantly on history painting, that is, on biblical and mythological scenes or on themes derived from history and literature. They considered genre scenes to be beneath their dignity or that of their profession. If we bear in mind that genre scenes must have been made in the hundreds of thousands, then such an elitist attitude tells us something about the discrepancy between theory and practice; and at the same time also about the value and range of our theory in this respect. The situation with regard to portraits hardly differs. Many tens of thousands were commissioned in the seventeenth century, but the theoreticians either chose to ignore the subject, or barely touched upon it."

What has been written on genre painting and genre painters in the literature on Dutch art from Karel van Mander (1604) to Gerard de Lairese (in 1707) would probably fit on two, or at most three pages and is therefore negligible." How, therefore, could specific aspects of genre painting, such as representation and meaning, have received serious attention? It is often insufficiently realised that treatises on art theory are actually part of a rhetorical tradition and the tradition of poetics, in which it was not the custom to investigate questions of content, such as the ascription of meaning to a theme or the inclusion of symbolic elements. In this context, it is illuminating to make a comparison with Joost van den Yondel's *Aanleidinge ter Nederduitsche Dichtkunne* (Introduction to Dutch Poetry), a literary-theoretical essay from 1650, which formulates a series of fundamental propositions on language and style for the benefit of those desiring to become proficient in the writing of poetry. In it, no attention whatsoever is devoted to subject or meaning, while in Yondel's own considerable oeuvre the importance of just these two elements cannot be overestimated."

Unfortunately, art history lacks a seventeenth-century treatise which places genre scenes, still lifes, landscapes etcetera in an iconological perspective, as is done with personifications in Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia*, the influential manual for allegory, which first appeared in a Dutch translation in 1644.<sup>11</sup> Just as Ripa prescribes how an artist must paint allegories of Generosity, Chastity, Abundance, the continent of Europe or Holy Rome, an imaginary primer for the genre painter could have contained directions for how a particular amorous situation could be depicted, which ingredients were needed to dress a specific virtue in bourgeois idiom, or how mortality could be alluded to in the visual vocabulary of the everyday. As this treatise was never written, no direct seventeenth-century answer can be obtained to the crucial question of how we should read a seventeenth century genre scene.

## Words and Images

The debate on the question of form and content does not convince me that the subject and meaning of works of art were generally of little relevance to the seventeenth-century painter and his public. We have too much evidence to the contrary, namely motifs and representations whose communicative intention is difficult to doubt and whose semantic value is rea-

sonably demonstrable. Of course, with the exception of allegories and the like, it can, strictly speaking, seldom *be* entirely proved that the artist intended to instill specific meanings into certain parts, or indeed into his entire depiction, but in countless cases the probability on this point turns out to be so high that neglect or denial of the message of the content would point to a feat of interpretation at of an 'art for art's sake' bias. Furthermore, it would be doing an injustice to the artists. for in the seventeenth century a part of the joy of creation lay in the ingenious construction of the content and in references to matters outside the painting.

Nevertheless I would not want to give too rose-tinted a picture of the legibility of iconography. Seventeenth-century artists have often made it difficult enough for art historians with exegetic ambitions. It turns out that many representations cannot be traced back to a specific meaning, let alone a precise identification of their tone or mode, or the intention of their makers. In addition, some works may have been deliberately intended to be polyvalent. We simply lack a method of verifying this claim.<sup>12</sup>

A representative example of a painting about which various aspects can be explained, but whose ultimate meaning, rone and intention nevertheless remains elusive, is Vermeer's *Lady Standing at a Virginal* (Pu., 3).<sup>13</sup> A striking detail visible behind this musician is a depiction of a cupid holding a card or a rectangular piece of paper in his raised left hand, and leaning on a bow with his right hand. There are various readings of this detail, bur for the time be-



FIGURE 3 Johannes Vermeer, *A lady standing at the virginal*. National Gallery, London.



FIGURE 4 Ono Vaenius, 'Only One; emblem from Ono Vaenius, *Amorum emblemata*, Antwerp 1608.

ing I am assuming that Vermeer derived the god of love from an illustration in Octo Vaenius' extremely popular emblem book, the *Amorum emblemata* (Fu., 4).<sup>14</sup> The print in question shows the number 1 on the raised card (here actually a sign), while the cupid is standing on a board marked with the numbers 2 to 10. The accompanying motto and poem instruct us that it is allowed to love only one person. That is why Amor is demonstratively waving the number I and treading the higher numbers underfoot.

Although the card held up by Vermeer's cupid is blank and the board with the other numbers is missing, we can assume that in conceiving his painting Vermeer had the meaning expressed by Vaenius in mind. Now, this hypothesis does not get us very far. Even if it is correct, we are still ignorant as to Vermeer's exact intention. How, and this seems to me an important question, did the painter want the moral he had included to function?

There would appear to be more than one possible answer to this question. Perhaps Vermeer wanted to present the message conveyed by the cupid as a reflection of the life of the beguiling musician. But it could just as easily be that he is holding up the moral in question for her for imitation, because her conduct left something to be desired. A third possibility is that the moral is aimed at us, the viewers. However, perhaps (this is the fourth option) Vermeer was leaving all those possibilities open and the choice up to the beholder. This choice could then be either unambiguous and unequivocal, the latter case combining all of these possible readings. Whatever the case may be, we do not know what Vermeer intended, any more than we can make a valid statement about the tone of his visual commu-

nications. How much seriousness, or humour or irony he may have woven into his representation, or even how **lightly** or seriously we should interpret the moral, about this too Vermeer leaves us in the dark. And we are not the only ones, probably. Another question is whether Vermeer's contemporaries recognised the degree of ambiguities in his intentions.

In its refusal to be frank with us and reveal the structure of its meaning, the *Lady Standing at a Virginal* is certainly no exception. That countless paintings are reticent about their intrinsic meaning could very well have something to do with the general fascination of the seventeenth century with the enigmatic, with ambiguities or partial disguise. Formulated as an aesthetic principle and partly based on much older rhetorical principles, we can detect this fascination in diverse literary writings, and occasionally in art theory.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike Svetlana Alpers who, as I said, regards Dutch culture of the seventeenth century as a visual culture *par excellence*, and looks for the essence of seveneenth-century painting in its surface, in this discourse I want to emphasise what I would like to call the 'taligheid', or, in German, the 'Sprachlichkeit' of the art and culture of that time. As far as I know there is no such term in English, but the adjective 'linguistic' or 'linguistical' comes closest.

My interest is in art which somehow incorporates elements of language, painted words or expressions. In principle, two patterns can be identified here: words which are illustrated through appropriation of the actual letters; and words, texts, which have been transformed and assimilated into the rest of the composition. I will give two examples: a *Still Life* by Jan Davidsz, de Heem from 1628 (FIG. 5), in which words are depicted in their literal form, and a *SelfPortrait* by Rembrandt in which no letters appear but in which, if I am correct, a word is visualised which is meaningful for Rembrandt. We will return to that presently.



FIGURE 5 Jan Davidsz, de Heem, *Still life with books* (J 628). Mauritshuis, The Hague.



However, we must not overlook the fact that there are two sides to every coin. We could easily regard manifestations of the linguistic in the light of the sisterhood of word and image, of poetry and painting, which was endlessly proclaimed in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Holland." This affinity not only represented a humanistic cliché coined in Italy, it also reflected a real situation. In practice word and image were often very close to each other. Many an artist attempted to wield both pen and brush and many painters were members of a chamber of rhetoric.<sup>18</sup> And where seventeenth-century art is partly characterised by a high degree of the linguistic, prose and above all poetry on the other hand can sometimes be extremely 'pictorialise', a word that does appear in the English vocabulary.<sup>19</sup>

As far as the latter is concerned, with her emphasis on the visual in Dutch art and culture, Alpers has a point: the visual and the pictorial are after all closely related to each other. On the other hand, she prefers to remain blind to the reverse, namely the pronounced tendency to enrich visual images with the linguistic.

Pictorialism is particularly obvious in the work of a poet like JOOS van den Vondel, whose *Introduction to Dutch Poetry* has already been referred to. In the course of his long career, Vondel repeatedly made use, with apparent pleasure, of technical painting terms in his descriptions of nature, for example.<sup>20</sup> He presented his first drama *Pascha* as a 'living-beautiful-fine painting'.<sup>21</sup> Later, he was inspired by a painting by Jan Pynas to write the tragedy *Joseph in Dothan* (FIG. 6), whose final act in particular can be called a successful example of his attempt to 'imitate with words the painter's paint, drawings and passions...'. Drawing to be understood here as design."



FIGURE 6 Jan Pynas, *Joseph's blood-stained clothing, shown to Jacob*. Hermitage, Sr. Petersburg.

With regard to pictorialism, Vondel also wrote more than two hundred poems about paintings and he was certainly not the only one to practise this specific genre of poetry. In one of these poems Vondel mentioned the Frisian painter Wybrand de Geest, recalling that De Geest had also been lauded by a Frisian poet; 'It is his custom to marry your painting to his poetry,':" Such lines flowed with great regularity from seventeenth-century pens and belong to the countless testimonies legitimising and perpetuating the sisterhood of word and image.

Also of interest in this context is the fact that in 1641 the translation of a Spanish novel was dedicated to Wybrand de Geest, 'in which all the defects of the age, among people from all walks of life, were punished, for delight and for instruction; and nakedly displayed as in a painting.' Equally as fascinating as the comparison with a picture, is the double definition of quality used here, namely that it be pleasurable and instructive. To be both enjoyable and elevating was the goal of all the arts in the seventeenth century and in so doing it was possible to call on the universally respected Horace. His statement; 'He has won every vote who mingles profit with pleasure' (*Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci*) was repeated *ad infinitum* with and without variations." It is therefore not surprising that it was usually on the level of the moral or the level of the deeper meaning - the 'nice meanings' Ridderus spoke of - that painting and literature came closest to each other.

The use of the family metaphor (sisterhood) was one way of indicating the intimate relationship between the literary and visual arts. The use of a second phrase from Horace, *ut picture poesis*, lifted from its context and, since the Renaissance, translated as 'a painting is like a poem' was another effective expression of the same idea." Yet it was no less usual to speak, after Plutarch, of painting as dumb poetry and of poetry as speaking painting." The reader is undoubtedly familiar with all these clichés.

What is perhaps not so generally known is that rhetoric was also part of the game. A good piece of oratory, we read in manuals of rhetoric, was supposed to be 'painted' in variegated colours, with contrasts of light and dark. In rhetorical prescriptions, colour was particularly favoured as a qualitative designation well into the eighteenth century." In 1776 Sir Joshua Reynolds, for example, was still proclaiming to his students that: "Well-turned periods in eloquence, or harmony of numbers in poetry (C.) are in those arts what colouring is in painting."?

Intimacy between word and image was not always guaranteed. When the question arose as to which of the two could claim to be the leader, animosity might arise between the sisters. Competition between the arts, also that between painting and sculpture known in art history as 'paragone', was partially a realistic affair and part shadow-boxing cultivated by the theoreticians. Leonardo da Vinci was already convinced of the superiority of painting to poetry on the basis of the fact that painting served the noblest sense.<sup>31</sup> In seventeenth-century Holland, the treatise writer Philips Angel, in his *Praise of painting* of 1642, forwarded the same opinion; although for him a deciding argument was the greater financial gain, the brush providing more than the pen."

Such considerations do not occur in the *pictura-poesis* literature, simply because there visual and literary elements are strung together and there is no room for competition. Examples of this sort of literature are illustrated collections of proverbs, illustrated broad-

sheets, illustrated songbooks, iconologies and emblem books, all produced by the ton in the seventeenth century. The emblem book in particular, in which word and image are joined in the most pregnant manner, flourished enormously at the rime."

Although they were not usually published separately, this category also includes hundreds of poems about specific pictures, mainly portraits. I have already mentioned Vondel's two hundred works in this context." Whereas these are rexr about depictions, there are also many depictions of texts, such as proverb paintings for example. Famous is Pieter Bruegel's painting of 1559, in which eighty-five proverbs and sayings are literally, as it were, transformed into images (FIG. 7).<sup>35</sup> We can find such transformations in many other paint-



FIGURE 7 Pieter Bruegel, *Netherland proverbs* (1559). Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

ings toO, though on a less encyclopedic scale than in the Bruegel. Usually this is a single detail more or less emphatically incorporated into the composition, for example in a painting by Anthonie Croos from 1665, a *View of The Hague from the Northwest* (FIG. 8), in which the repoussoir at the right - a gnarled tree with a bird-nester - conceals a familiar seventeenth-century saying." It is also illustrated in an etching by Claes Janszoon Visscher after a painting by David Vinckboons (FIG. 9), with rhyming caption: 'He who knows where the nest is, knows it/ but he who steals it, has it'.<sup>37</sup> Nowadays we would say 'Possession is nine tenths of the law', that is, it is not so easy to get your hands on something."



FIGURE 8 Anthonie Croos, *Landscape with a view of The Hague* (1665). Musee des Augustins, Toulouse.



FIGURE 9 Claes Jansz. Visscher, etching after David Vinckboons, *The birds-nester*.

Many seventeenth-century paintings include details which turn out to be no more than accurate visual translations of texts or words. The viewer was expected to distil the word from the image as it were, that is, to decode it: a mental activity which must have contributed to his aesthetic experience.

I suspect that Rembrandt indulged in this practice as well. In the 1656 inventory of his possessions is mentioned a work described as 'a bittern, after life, by Rembrandt's' This is almost certainly the *Self-portrait with Bittern* (FIG. 10) of 1639, a portrait which in our time has been variously interpreted in terms of eroticism, social status, vanitas and natural ingenuity." Traditionally, imagination was considered part of that ingenuity. The latter is in keeping with what I would like to add to this bouquet of interpretations, that is, the possibility of a Rembrandtian pun, which incidentally does not necessarily exclude other connotations,



FIGURE 10 Rembrandt van Rijn, *Self-portrait with a dead bittern* (1639).  
Gemaldegalerie, Dresden.

'A bittern, after life'; in seventeenth-century Dutch, the bittern was called 'pitoor' (sometimes written with two t's)." The word 'pitoor' is very close to *pictor*, the Latin term for painter, and even more close to the Italian *pittore*. The words, especially pitoor and *pittore* are also quite similar in pronunciation. That for this unusual portrait Rembrandt chose this particular bird and emphasizes it through lighting and positioning, is probably less a coincidence than it would appear.

Naturally, this pitoor-pittore-pictor association is of trifling importance, but it would be incorrect to claim that an artist of Rembrandt's quality would feel himself above such things. It would be difficult to overestimate the status enjoyed by puns and visualisations of words in the seventeenth century. It was only in the twentieth century that punning came to be considered the lowest level of wit.

A consummate master in this respect was Jan Steen (FK: 11, 12). Considering the nature of seventeenth-century humour, we can assume that Sceens saucy puns and expressions cast in visual motifs were highly appreciated. His visualisation of an obscene expression about the filling of a tobacco pipe as an allusion to coitus is a typical example of this genre. Steen repeated the joke a number of times, just as he more than once played visual games with the ambiguity of the word 'kous', which apart from a stocking can also refer to the female sexual organs." Other artists amused the public in a similar way with stockings,



FIGURE 11 Jan Steen, *The interior of an inn*. National Gallery, London.



FIGURE 12 Jan Steen, *Woman at her toilet*. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



FIGURE 13 Adriaen van de Venne, '*Geekie met de kous*'; Muzeum Narodowe, Warsaw.

for example Adriaen van de Venne (FIG. 13) and, later in the century, Cornelis Dusart in a watercolour showing a *Lascivious couple* (FIG. 14), in which we see the woman demonstratively waving the garment in question."



FIGURE 14 Cornelis Dusart, *Lascivious couple* (1687, watercolour). British Museum, London.

While this soft of titillating joking abounded in seventeenth-century art, virtue was preached incessantly and could also be translated from one medium to the other, from word to image. An example of visualised rectitude is found in a 1679 *Family portrait* of the children of a Leiden burgomaster by Daniel Mytens II (FIG. 15).<sup>44</sup> It is completely based on Ripa's *Iconologia*, the standard allegorical guide mentioned earlier, which included both texts and accompanying illustrations, which in themselves are already abstractions made concrete.



FIGURE 15 Daniel Mytens II, *Family portrait* (1679). Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

Nine children are posed before a park-like background with a round temple and several free-standing columns, one of which is draped by a voluminous red curtain; a tenth child hovers as an angel above the group, indicating that it is dead. The scene's unrealistic character is accentuated by the children's colourful costumes, which bear little resemblance to contemporary fashion, as well as by some of their accoutrements. Each of the figures appears to represent a specific virtue, making this family portrait simultaneously an allegorical tableau. It is a matter of *some* conjecture whether the iconographic programme, which must have been developed by the patron - undoubtedly the Leiden burgomaster - in coo-



junction with the painter, was intended as an exhortation for the children to adopt the relevant virtues, or if it was meant to suggest that the offspring already exemplified the combined ethic.

I will refrain from giving an inventory of all the concepts and motifs derived from Ripa: after all, the necessary liberties were sometimes taken. Everything which was too obviously unrealistic was left out. As *pars pro toto*, I will only show Temperance and Constancy (FIG. 16, 17): two of Ripa's personifications which are imitated by the sitting girl with the bridle (but without Ripa's elephant), and the standing girl to the far right, who grasps a pillar and holds a sword above a fire. She is taken over wholesale from the *Iconologia*.<sup>45</sup>



FIGURE 16 *Temperance*, illustration from Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia*, Amsterdam 1644.



FIGURE 17 *Constancy*, illustration from Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia*, Amsterdam 1644.

One could claim that the process of transformation in Mytens' picture is somewhat different since the people portrayed also had visual origins, starting in Ripa's woodcuts. On the other hand Ripa's text was also used and translated visually, a facet that would lead us too far astray to go into now. In any case, it does not seem exaggerated to me to characterise Mytens' painting as a particularly 'bookish' performance.

## Still Lives

I would like to emphasise that not everything was equally 'bookish' or linguistic in Dutch art of the seventeenth century. Just as there is enough seventeenth-century poetry in which the painterly element remained limited or was even completely absent, naturally the language content is not equally present in each painting. But whilst it can easily be shown that

throughout the seventeenth century there were artists who had little interest in producing images à la Steen or Mytens with visualised expressions or ideas, there were many painters who enjoyed accommodating linguistic details **into** their compositions, which often led to intriguing iconography, whether or not it was decodable.

As I have already briefly mentioned, two basic patterns can be **identified** in the use of linguistic expressions in the **fine arts**. First, expressions which have been transformed into a visual motif, such as proverbs, sayings, words, examples of which we have seen in Bruegel, Rembrandt, Steen and Mytens. And second, expressions which have been left in their 'natural form', thus words openly imitated in paint, written or printed. We saw an example of this category in the *Still Life* by Jan Davidsz. de Heem (Fig.5). **Of** the books displayed in this painting, two bear titles and the names of the authors, Bredero and [acob Westerbaen:<sup>16</sup> In the Dutch Republic with its enormous book production and high degree of literacy, this sort of still life enjoyed an uninterrupted popularity.

According to Svetlana Alpers, words and texts in paintings, 'rather than supplying **un-**derlying meanings', above all give us more to look **at**.<sup>47</sup> In her view, they are eyecatchers which 'extend without deepening the reference of the work'. Indeed, the *mise-en-page* of a text, or the contrasts between a fragment with letters and the rest of a painting's configuration, can produce splendid artistic results, **but** that does not alter the fact that texts often have yet another function. **On** many occasions they are added to lend depth Or nuance to the effect of a depiction, or to offer an amusing commentary on that depiction.

An ingenious painting by Gerard van Honthorst of 1625 (FIG. 18) is a typical representative of seventeenth-century humour." It depicts a courtesan ostentatiously pointing



FIGURE 18 Gerard van Honthorst, *Young woman holding a medaillon* (1625). City Art Museum, Se. Louis, Missouri.

to a medallion with a nude woman seen from the back, her head turned away, sitting on a folding table. We should probably regard the courtesan and the miniature nude as one and the same person. Written under the nude figure is; 'Wie kent mijn naeis van Aferen' - 'Who knows my nose from behind.' The Dutch word used here for 'nose' is 'naeis', which should probably be understood as a dialect form of the word for nose, 'neus', with perhaps a nod to the word 'naers', which means the same as 'arse'!"

Indeed, we cannot know her nose from behind and looking at her does not help because she teasingly holds a hand before her face. A mirror on the table elaborates the joke even further - her turned head also prevents her nose from being seen in the mirror. Seventeenth-century viewers must have found all this very amusing.

A less daring variant of this humour, where word and image are once again artfully combined and, moreover, supplemented with a moral, is an engraving by Hendrick Bary (FIG. 19) made much later in the seventeenth century. The standing man seen from behind bears the following rhymed comrnentr." 'Who looks upon me fain would know! Who am I and what I wear;/ But friend I am like he who sees me;/ because I do not know my selves.'

A moment ago when I mentioned Jan Davidsz. de Heern for the second time, I spoke of several still lifes in which texts play a role, texts in what I have called their 'natural shape'. With these stilllifes I will bring to a close my exposition about the painted word and it will hopefully become clear that texts-in-paint could and do provide, not only visual pleasures, but also intellectual information. This recalls Pastor Ridderus, whose standpoint to my mind reflects the consensus at the time, namely the idea that painting is about both artistry and meaning, which preferably should show some ingenuity.



FIGURE 19 Hendrick Bary, *Standing man* (engraving).

Still lifes with books, I have just said, remained popular throughout the seventeenth century. The last quarter of the century witnesses some painters, the most interesting being Edwaert Collier, who could not get enough of books and texts.<sup>51</sup> Characteristic of his style is a *Vanitas Still Life* (Fig. 20) including a songbook entitled *Cupidoos lustho*/(Cupid's pleasure garden), Flavius Josephus' *History a/the Jewish War*, and a Dutch translation of a then-famous book by the sixteenth-century French Calvinist Du Bartas, *La Sepmaine ou la creation du monde*. The meticulous manner in which the painter has depicted the three tide pages, or perhaps we should say, written them out, shows a certain mania with regard to the seductive sisterhood of word and image.



FIGURE 20 Edwaert Collier, *Vanitas stil/life*. Sredelijk Museum 'de Lakenhal', Leiden.

No less interesting in iconographic terms is a *Still Life* attributed to Collier (FIG. 21), which includes a sculpture of a cross-bearing Christ. This is not an invention of the painter, but a rather exact reproduction of Michelangelo's *Christ in Santa Maria sopra Minerva* in Rome. Books are also visible, including one that is particularly appropriate in our context, namely the 1644 Dutch edition of Ripa's *Iconologia* (FIG. 22). Here Ripa is not translated into other forms and material as in Jan Mytens' *Family Portrait* (FIG. 15), but faithfully imitated in its physical aspects. The book is opened, not at all randomly, to the section on *Glory, Fame, Honour*, page 441. The painter's meticulousness extends to the signature and *custos*, or catchword at the bottom of the page.<sup>52</sup>



FIGURE 21 Edwaert Collier or Simon Renard de Sainr-Andre, *Still life with sculpture*. Whereabouts unknown.



FIGURE 22 Page from Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia*, Amsterdam 1644.

Collier and his followers were not the only ones to eagerly embrace significant books. Many other painters also incorporated primed matter with great refinement into canvas or panel. An exceptional picture was that by [an van der Heyden, better known as the painter of urban views and the inventor of the fire engine, but here excelling as a painter of valuable collectible items and two opened folios (FIG. 23)].<sup>53</sup> They are, on the chair to the right, the Dutch Authorized Version of the Bible, and on the table, an atlas by Blaeu, the *Toned des Aerdrycks*. The texts have been included right down to the smallest typographical details with striking precision, just as the map in the atlas of fortifications at Bergen op Zoom are enormously accurate.



FIGURE 23 Jan van der Heyden, *Still life with books and curiosities*. Szepmuveszeri Muzeum, Budapest.

The Bible is open at the first page of the book of *Proverbs* which begins with the well-known saying 'Vanity of vanities, all is vanity', a text which was depicted separately in countless still lifes, usually, as in those by Bailly and Collier, in Latin. In the case of Jan van der Heyden, the choice of the book of *Proverbs* must be seen in relation to the unusual signature used here by the painter. It is 'old J.v.d.h. 75 years', which means that this masterpiece was painted in 1712, the year of Van der Heyden's death. The creation of such a still life by a seventy-five-year-old, with such a steady hand and such precision, is an achievement of the first order.

## Conclusion

To conclude I would like to return to Holland's leading seventeenth-century poet, whose poerica, *An Introduction to Dutch Poetry* was briefly discussed, as was the fact that he wrote many poems about paintings: Joos van den Vondel. One of his poems figures concretely in a *Still life* by Cornelis Brise (FIG. 24, 25).<sup>54</sup> The work is signed with a flourish on one of the depicted books, and dated 1665. Although it shows an untidy pile of odds and ends, the sisterhood of word and image is extravagantly celebrated in this piece where painting and poetry perform an unusually effective duet.



FIGURE 24 Cornelis Brise, *Vaniers still life* (1665). Rijksmuseum Amsterdam



FIGURE 25 Cornelis Brise, *Vanitas still life*, detail Figure 24.

Even more striking than the elegant signature is the sheet of paper or parchment with Vondel's verse, which in ten lines sings the praises of man's equality in the face of death-

'Death equates both high and low  
Middling and rich and poor just so  
Dying is the common lot,  
Bookish knowledge and marotte  
Have equal wisdom in the grave.  
The digger's spade and bishop's stave,  
The bagpipes and the turban crown,  
Are just as fair when life's laid down.  
So let them bustle, those that will,  
It all ends up by standing still.'

The last line of the poem, literally 'So staar het al ten lesten stil' (So stands it all, at long last, still), has a gratification of its own. Given the seventeenth-century infatuation with puns, allusions and double meanings, it is not inconceivable that there should be a play on words here. One is led to think of the word *stilleuen*, still life, a new word at the time."

With a few small changes, Brise wrote out the lines from the poem entitled 'On a painting', which Vondel published in 1660 and to which he added the motto 'Sceptra lignonibus aequar': sceptre and spade by death are equal made." We do not know which painting Vondel had in mind at the time, or at least there is no documentation, but we can imagine it, as his verse corresponds to a number of the objects depicted by Brise in 1665: book, marotte (standard attribute of the jester), spade, crook, bagpipes and turban crown. In fact, the engaging text implies that Brise's still life contains the same ingredients and possibly looks like the unknown painting that had inspired Vondel to write his poem five years earlier. It is highly probable that this unknown work was also by Brise. His *Still Life of 1665* could be a variant or a replica, to which that extremely relevant poem was added with appropriate pride.

One could argue that art history as a discipline is characterised by a high percentage of speculative statements and deductions. My elucidation of Brise's still life and the place of Vondel's poem in it, is just such a speculation. We know absolutely nothing about the relationship between the great poet and the somewhat less great painter; if it is even possible to speak of a relationship. This is how the art historian is - I would almost say - led astray, but what I mean is, how he is driven to speculation.



