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1. Pieter de Hooch, *A girl with a basket in a garden*, 1661?, Basel, Kunstmuseum

Wayne E. Franits

The depiction of servants in some paintings by Pieter de Hooch

The Dutch seventeenth-century painter Pieter de Hooch is well-known for his paintings of domestic themes, works that comprise a considerable part of his *œuvre*¹. De Hooch's numerous paintings of housewives and their maids have long been esteemed as quintessential expressions of the virtues of domesticity. Moreover, he is one of the few artists of his day to depict servants as an independent subject².

It is possible that Pieter de Hooch had a personal interest in portraying servants. In a document

dated 28 May 1653, he himself is recorded as a servant (*dienaar*) of the Delft linen merchant Justus de la Grange. Apparently, a fellow servant had suddenly vanished from De la Grange's service presumably stealing some of his master's posses-

¹ In his exemplary monograph on the artist, Peter C. Sutton: *Pieter de Hooch*, Oxford 1980, 45 states that domestic subjects compose more than one-third of De Hooch's works.

² See, for example, *ibid.*, color pls. VIII, IX; pls. 39, 40, 41, 42, 49.



2. Illustration from: Jacob Cats, *Proteus ofte minne-beelden verandert in sinnebeelden*, Rotterdam 1627, Amsterdam, Universiteits-Bibliotheek

sions in the process. The belongings that this servant had left behind were consequently auctioned. A cloth coat that remained unsold was given to »De Hoogh, Schilder, mede dienaar van de voorsz. La Grange«³. Although the document specifically describes De Hooch as a painter who was a servant of De la Grange, the exact nature of their relationship remains unclear. Nevertheless, it is known that De la Grange owned eleven paintings by the artist⁴. This fact along with the wording of the document has led scholars to postulate that De Hooch probably worked as an artist under contract to De la Grange, to wit, handing over part or all of his paintings in exchange for room and board or some comparable benefit⁵.

There were precedents for this type of commercial relationship in the seventeenth century because the painters Emmanuel de Witte and Nicolaes Berchem were involved in similar agreements. However, there is one notable difference: De Hooch is the only one of the three artists who is specifically identified as a *dienaar*. De Witte was employed by a »patron« but the surviving documents unequivocally indicate that their relation-

ship was purely contractual: he received room and board and a stipend in exchange for his paintings⁶. In Berchem's case, our source Arnold Houbraken simply notes that he produced pictures for a certain gentleman who paid him ten guilders *per diem*⁷.

It is important to reiterate that the precise nature of De Hooch's arrangement with De La Grange is unclear. But because of the manner in which it is recorded in the document – versus the purely contractual agreements of De Witte and Berchem – we can speculate that he might have actually been De La Grange's servant if only for a brief period of time. The document in which De Hooch is described as a servant and painter was drafted in May 1653, in other words when he was no older than twenty-three. As a relatively new resident of Delft – De Hooch was a native of Rotterdam – perhaps the young painter needed to support himself by another occupation, a not uncommon practice among artists in The Netherlands at this time⁸.

³ De Hooch was given the coat because the other servant had stolen his own coat. For the document in question, see A. Bredius: »Iets over de Hooch,« *Nederlandsche Kunstbode, Beeldende Kunst, Oudheidkunde, Kunstnijverheid*, III, 1881, 126; *idem*: »Bijdragen tot de biographie van Pieter de Hooch,« *Oud Holland*, VII, 1889, 162. See also Sutton, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 9 and 145 document 15.

⁴ De la Grange gave these paintings to a relative in 1655, presumably to cover a debt; see Sutton, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 146 document 23.

⁵ See for example, Leonard J. Slatkes: *Vermeer and his contemporaries*, New York 1981, 124. Sutton, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 9 states that there is no proof that De Hooch ever resided with De la Grange and that their relationship appears to have been short-lived.

⁶ See Ilse Manke: *Emanuel de Witte 1617–1692*, Amsterdam 1963, 3–4. See also A. Bredius: *Künstler-Inventare: Urkunden zur Geschichte der holländischen Kunst des XVIten, XVIIten und XVIIIten Jahrhunderts*, The Hague 1918, V, 1837–45.

⁷ Arnold Houbraken: *De groote schouburgh der Nederlandsche konstschilders en schilderessen*, 2nd ed., The Hague 1753, II, 112–13.

⁸ See Sutton, *op. cit.*, (n. 1), 9 and 145 document 14, which places De Hooch in Delft before August 5, 1652. See also *ibid.*, 9 and 245 document 18, a proclamation of the artist's betrothal recorded on 12 April 1654 in which De Hooch is once again living in Rotterdam. *Ibid.*, 9 also notes that upon his entry into the Delft guild in September 1655, De Hooch could only afford to pay part of the entrance fee required of artists born outside the city.



3. Pieter de Hooch, *The courtyard of a house in Delft, with a woman and child*, 1658, London, The National Gallery (Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees, The National Gallery, London)

Whatever the nature of De Hooch's and De la Grange's relationship, it is possible that it influenced the former's decision to depict servants frequently in his art, and even his choice of symbolism in this regard. From this standpoint, De

⁹ For this painting, see *ibid.*, cat. no. 45. The painting is also discussed in Petra ten-Doesschate Chu and Paul H. Boerlin: *Im Lichte Hollands; Holländische Malerei des 17. Jahrhunderts aus den Sammlungen des Fürsten von Liechtenstein und aus Schweizer Besitz*, exh. cat., Kunstmuseum, Basel 1987, 146, cat. no. 47. There it is stated that the woman with the basket must be recognized as the mistress of the house because she wears pearl earrings. However, the fact that the woman is wearing earrings does not necessarily mean that she is the mistress of the house. As strange as it seems, maids evidently wore pearl earrings in the seventeenth century

Hooch's painting of a maid in a garden, carrying a shallow straw basket filled with beans (now in the Kunstmuseum in Basel), is particularly revealing (Fig. 1)⁹. At first glance, the representation appears

since they are depicted wearing them in a number of contemporary paintings, including ones by De Hooch; see Sutton, *op. cit.* (n. 1), pls., 115, 127, 135; color pls., XI, XIII. Not all of these women are wearing actual earrings. In many instances, the jewelry is attached to their bonnets (which could be the case with the painting by De Hooch under consideration here); see for example, Gerrit Dou's *The Young Mother* in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin-Dahlem. This picture is illustrated in Werner Sumowski: *Gemälde der Rembrandt-Schüler*, Landau/Pfalz 1983, I, 583 no. 286. For the wide variety of hats, bonnets, etc. . . ., worn by women in Dutch seventeenth-century paintings, see Maria Meyer: *Das Kostüm auf*

to be commonplace. The maid has evidently picked the beans from the tall stalks behind her and is shown returning to the house. Yet on the shutter of the window closest to the viewer is a portrait of a man in sixteenth-century costume, wearing the gold chain and pendant of the famous Order of the Golden Fleece¹⁰. This little portrait is completely unexpected in this ostensibly straightforward context and besides, to my knowledge, portraits were not actually painted on window shutters in the seventeenth century. The very incongruity of this motif is further underscored by the fact that the man wears a sixteenth-century costume adorned with the chain of the Order of the Golden Fleece, which only confirms that De Hooch included the portrait for a purely symbolic purpose.

Peter Sutton's reluctant observation that the painting might relate to an emblem from Jacob Cats's *Proteus ofte minne-beelden verandert in sinne-beelden* (1627) would appear to deserve stronger support¹¹. In its *pictura* a couple in a garden point to a beanstalk which has grown so tall that it extends precariously beyond its stake (fig. 2). The *subscriptio* likens the beanstalk's ultimately injurious rapid growth to the danger of unbridled ambition in the quest for social status¹². The significance of this emblem for our understanding of De Hooch's painting cannot be doubted. The conceit that it expresses, comparing the growth of the plant to the dangers of pursuing rank, is illustrated in the painting by the tall beanstalks in combination with the portrait on the window shutter of a man wearing the chain of the Order of the Golden Fleece, the very epitome of status.

In light of the presence and meaning of the motifs of the beanstalks and portrait in De Hooch's painting, the inclusion of a servant cannot be coincidental. In contrast to the symbols of rank and status, the motif of the maid carrying the basket filled with beans may have been meant to allude to humility¹³. Numerous prescriptions concerning servant behavior were published during the seventeenth century, most notably in the enormously popular household treatises of the day, domestic conduct books¹⁴. In these books and related works, servants were charged to be humble, to

serve their employers obediently with fear and trembling, accepting their station in life as a divine calling, »dat Godt dese gehoorsaemheyt ende dienst die sy aen hare Meesters ende Vrouwen bewijsen/ selfs sal vergelden«¹⁵. Clearly, the relationship described in contemporary literature is an archetypal one. As the recent work of several social historians has confirmed, the writings of Cats, Wittewrongel, and their contemporaries on the subject of master/servant relationships presents an ideal vision which was rarely reflected in daily life at that time. Since seventeenth-century Dutch paintings of virtuous housewives and maids reflect this literary ideal, we can conclude that the domestic world depicted in these works of art is to a large extent fictitious. Thus the lowly maid in De Hooch's painting was probably intended to con-

niederländischen Bildern; zum Modewandel im 17. Jahrhundert, Münster 1986, 20–36.

¹⁰ For the Order of the Golden Fleece, see *Het Gulden Vlies; vijf eeuwen kunst en geschiedenis*, exh. cat., Stedelijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Bruges 1962.

¹¹ Sutton, *op. cit.* (n. 1), 70 n. 85, cites the emblem by Cats and states that »while, here again, it is conceivable a similar meaning was intended in the painting, De Hooch's general disregard for such »disguised« references suggests the possibility is remote.«

¹² Jacob Cats: *Proteus ofte minne-beelden verandert in sinnebeelden*, Rotterdam 1627, II, 42–3 no. 21.

¹³ Ten-Doesschate Chu and Boerlin, *op. cit.* (n. 9), 146, cite a recent interpretation of the work by Yvonne Boerlin-Brodbeck, »Pieter de Hooch, Frau mit Bohnenkorb im Gemüsegrätchen.« *Bildbetrachtung im Kunstmuseum Basel*, 30 May 1979. I have not been able to locate Boerlin-Brodbeck's study but it is summarized in the catalogue entry. Her interpretation of the painting seems too excessively complicated as various motifs are said to symbolize the course of human life and transience.

¹⁴ See for example, Jacob Cats: *Howwelyck. Dat is de gansche gelegentheyt des echten staets*, Middelburgh 1625; Petrus Wittewrongel: *Oeconomia Christiana ofte Christelicke huys-houdinghe*, 3rd ed., Amsterdam 1661. For domestic conduct books, see Louis B. Wright: *Middle-class culture in Elizabethan England*, 3rd ed., New York 1980, 201–27; Julius Hoffmann: *Die »Hausväterliteratur« und die »Predigten über den christlichen Hausstand«. Lehre vom Hause und Bildung für das häusliche Leben im 16., 17. und 18. Jahrhundert*, Weinheim/Berlin 1959; L. F. Groenendijk: *De nadere reformatie van het gezin; de visie van Petrus Wittewrongel op de Christelijke huishouding*, Dordrecht 1984.

¹⁵ Wittewrongel: *op. cit.*, (n. 14), I, 219–20. See further, *ibid.*, I, 205–20.



4. Pieter de Hooch, *Courtyard with an arbour in Delft*, 1658, Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, on loan from The Wrotham Collection

vey particular associations about humility within the context of the overall symbolic program of the picture, with its allusions to the dangers of pursuing rank and status.

The concept of humility, symbolized in the painting in Basel by the lowly maid, is literally expressed in two other works by De Hooch that depict servants: *The maid and child in a courtyard* in The National Gallery, London, and *Figures drinking in a courtyard with an arbor*, formerly on loan to The National Gallery, Edinburgh (Figs. 3 and 4). These two paintings, both monogrammed and dated 1658, are actually variants because they depict a similar setting: a courtyard to a house, presumably in Delft¹⁶. Moreover, they both include

the same plaque above the arch to the passageway connecting the courtyard with the street. As Cornelis Hofstede de Groot pointed out long ago, these plaques were modeled on a surviving one which actually hung over the entrance to the

¹⁶ For these paintings see Sutton, *op. cit.* (n. 1), cat. nos. 33, 34. See also Neil Maclaren: *The National Gallery catalogues: the Dutch school*, London 1960, 188–90 cat. no. 835. See also Peter C. Sutton *et al.*: *Masters of seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting*, exh. cat., Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia 1984, cat. no. 53. Obviously, these two paintings are not pendants owing to differences in size and composition. At this time, that is the late 1650's, De Hooch painted other courtyard scenes that include maids; see Sutton: *op. cit.*, (n. 1), pls. 34, 35, 39, 40.

Hieronimusdael Cloister in Delft during the seventeenth century¹⁷. It is inscribed: »Dit is in sint hieronimus daelle/ wildt v tot pacientie en lydtsaemheijt begeeven/wandt wij muetten eerst daellen/ willen wij worden verheeven 1614«¹⁸.

Although both pictures depict a similar courtyard the differences between them are obvious and meaningful. In the London painting, thought to be the later of the two variants, the view through the archway has been changed. Furthermore, the archway itself and the patio have different brickwork and the courtyard is now composed of two walls and also includes steps leading to a door¹⁹. However, the most significant changes involve the figures that are represented. In the earlier variant, we see a merry company consisting of a maid – identifiable as such by her plain clothing – who stands holding a wine glass beside a table where two men are drinking and smoking. A little girl with a seemingly besotted expression is seated directly under the archway, with a dog in her lap. In the London painting, this scene of merriment is replaced by one showing a child holding the hand of a woman, who can also be identified as a maid because of her simple costume²⁰.

The maid depicted in the canvas formerly on loan to Edinburgh is hardly a paradigm of good behavior. She stands in the company of two men who are drinking and smoking as she inspects a glass of wine. Perhaps the group's moral laxity is underscored by a soldier's coat and bandolier which hang suggestively from the window shutter at the far left. The little girl with the dog in her lap seated at the entrance to the passageway could very well provide further moral commentary upon the character of the merry trio. It is possible – though by no means certain – that this motif is meant to recall traditional images of sloth. A sixteenth-century print by Frans Huys after Cornelis Massys provides pictorial equivalents to contemporary proverbs about sluggishness, including one depicting a woman with a dog in her lap (Fig. 5)²¹. The inscription, which suggests that sluggards would rather delouse dogs than work, is based on the Netherlandish proverb: »den hond vloyen,« which means to squander time in idleness.

Like the woman in the print after Massys, the girl in the picture by De Hooch is not actually picking fleas from the animal she holds. However, De Hooch possibly intended to allude to representations of sloth by depicting the dog in her lap and also by the very fact that he has represented a child because in the seventeenth century, artists often used children to illustrate this vice²². It would be foolhardy to argue that every image of a child in seventeenth-century Dutch art holding a dog in his or her lap refers to indolence. Yet in the context of De Hooch's picture, with its depiction of a maid of questionable behavior, the motif of the girl and dog as a symbol of sloth would provide a fitting comment on the woman's neglect of duty.

The servant and child in the London variant conduct themselves in the very opposite manner, one that befits their station in life. Here a sober, diligent maid holding an earthenware dish descends a small set of stairs with a young girl. Their modest, humble behavior seems diametrically opposed to

¹⁷ C. Hofstede de Groot: *A catalogue raisonné of the works of the most eminent Dutch painters of the seventeenth century*, reprint ed., Teaneck/Cambridge 1976, I, 557 cat. no. 291.

¹⁸ This transcription is taken from *ibid.* Maclaren: *op. cit.* (n. 16), 188, translates the inscription as follows: »This is St. Jerome's vale, if you wish to repair to patience and meekness. For we must first descend if we wish to be raised.« Maclaren also notes that the inscriptions on the plaques in both variants do not exactly follow that on the existing one.

¹⁹ For these changes, see Sutton *et al.*: *op. cit.* (n. 16), 219.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, states that the woman is the girl's mother, a possibility that cannot be excluded.

²¹ See Jan Baptist Bedaux and Peter Hecht: »Ter Borch 2,« *Hollands Maandblad*, CXXXVI, 1974, 41. See also Konrad Renger: *Lockere Gesellschaft*, Berlin 1970, 85; H.-J. Raupp *et al.*: *Wort und Bild; Buchkunst und Druckgraphik in den Niederlanden im 16. und 17. Jahrhundert*, exh. cat., Belgisches Haus, Cologne 1981, cat. nos. 40; Hans-Joachim Raupp: »Ansätze zu einer Theorie der Genremalerei in den Niederlanden im 17. Jahrhundert,« *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, XLVI, 1983, 414.

²² See Susan Koslow: »Frans Hals's *Fischerboys*: exemplars of idleness,« *The Art Bulletin*, LVII, 1975, 429; Raupp, *op. cit.* (see n. 21), 414. In a painting by Gerard ter Borch, sloth is personified by a young boy who neglects his studies in order to delouse his dog; see *ibid.*, 413ff., fig. 5. See also Bedaux and Hecht, *op. cit.*, (see n. 21), 41.



5. Frans Huys after Cornelis Massys, La paresse, Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet

that of their »sisters« in the variant. In the foreground, a broom and cleaning pail are featured, objects which in this context most likely refer to domestic virtue.

These two paintings, which depict contrasting types of behavior, share the same inscribed plaque that advises one to be humble in life if one wants to rise in station. Regardless of the subtle nuances of meaning, it is significant that servants are portrayed in connection with this plaque. The London painting, with its virtuous maid, seems to express the idea of the inscription versus the variant formerly in Edinburgh where the maid's conduct is anything but humble. Moreover, the fact that the virtuous maid in the London variant is shown descending steps may have added significance in rela-

tion to the inscription on the plaque because it states that one must first descend if one wishes to rise²³. If viewed in relation to one another, the paintings can be regarded as *exempla* of good and bad behavior in servants, the plaque in both, with its appeal for humility, providing the moralizing commentary²⁴.

²³ See n. 18 above.

²⁴ It is important to note once again that these paintings are not pendants. Sutton *et al.*, *op. cit.* (see n. 16), 219, state that, »If a lesson was De Hooch's first concern, one would expect a more legible inscription«. This cannot be correct; Slatkes, *op. cit.* (n. 5), 124, had already recognized the suitability of the inscription for the subject that is depicted. Moreover, he observed that the spatial movements in and out of the architectural framework of the painting echo the play on words in the inscription.

The focus here on one's station in life and the virtues most befitting it is much the same as that encountered in De Hooch's painting in Basel of the maid in a garden. The artist's use of the motif of a maid to provide commentary on these ideas is intriguing in light of his own possible employment,

however brief, as a servant. We can therefore assume that De Hooch probably had a personal interest in representing servants in his paintings. In the absence of other details about his life, nothing more can be inferred.

Photos: 1 Öffentliche Kunstsammlungen, Basel. – 2 Universiteits Bibliotheek, Amsterdam. – 3 National Gallery, London. – 4 Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. – 5 Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.