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A Presence in an Empty space: Dummy Board Figures as Images of Amusement and Deception in Interiors 1660-1800

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By tracing and locating dummy board figures¹ in their cultural context some light can be shed on this little-known group of objects that represent a number of aspects of decorative arts history. As in many analyses of decorative arts, it is important to look at the wider cultural significance of the dummy boards as well as their apparent function as interior decoration. Looking at these objects presents certain problems from a methodological point of view. Firstly, they are for the most part unattributable, have little in the way of provenance, and therefore are not rooted in a particular history. Secondly, only a relatively small physical sample remains which is very variable in quality but nevertheless belies the probable widespread use of these figures during the period under review. Thirdly, there is the common problem of seeing historical objects with a modern eye, especially since the conditions of viewing, and the sensory expectations were often very different.²

It is an interesting phenomenon that, when relatively little is known about objects, there develops a build-up of fable and stories around them. Perhaps the number of beds that Queen Elizabeth I is alleged to have slept in exceeds the number of stories about dummy boards that abound, but she does have a royal advantage. The descriptions of the use of these figures have included Aunt Sallies for husbands to vicariously beat their wives; targets for firing practice; burglary protection for vacant houses, door stops, fire screens (probably from the *devant la cheminée* tradition) and most probably their use as “silent companions” or presences in empty spaces.

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Although there is no reason to build unsubstantiated and extravagant claims for the use of these objects that were really another part of a roomscape, albeit a part with a particular role, they are interesting as representatives of a particular aspect of living during the period 1660-1800.³ The original historian of dummy boards, H. Syer Cuming, writing in 1874 noted that, “the seventeenth century seems to have been an era particularly fertile in quaint fancies.”⁴ Whilst this may be true, dummy boards are more than a simple representation of quaint fancy. There are six particular aspects which will help to unravel the history of these figures: firstly the perennial fascination with matters of illusion and reality was particularly strong in the period; secondly, issues of power, ownership and materialism were also prime concerns of the time. Thirdly, the idea of “wit” embodied in notions that these decorative objects had a prime intention of amusement and fun. Fourthly, the probable Dutch origins of these objects: fifthly the production methods and procedures and finally an analysis of models and typology.

Illusion and Reality

Amongst the “quaint fancies” of the seventeenth century (and to some extent the eighteenth) the issues raised by concepts of illusion and reality were of prime interest. One of the bases of illusion was the creation of a see-sawing of opposite emotions, which created an interplay between the object and the subject, thereby tricking and entertaining the onlooker. The changes from “appearing” and “seeming”, to “being” and back again created a very real interaction for the subject. This fascination for beguiling the mind extended across a range of visual culture, including painting,

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literature, applied arts and the stage.⁵ Many other areas of life displayed this interest in a less obvious way. In cabinet-making, many pieces were produced with secret compartments or disguised uses or finishes, whilst Grinling Gibbons was highly regarded for his illusionistic carvings.⁶ In fashion, masks and fans played an important part in social rituals of pretence, and Queen Anne and the Duchess of Marlborough played fantasy games by calling each other Mrs Morley and Mrs Freeman respectively. Concurrent with these cultural concerns was a renewed fascination with science including optics and perspective.⁷

Two contemporary diarists give us a flavour of this interest in illusion and deception. In 1664, Pepys gave an account of his visit to a Mr Povey's home where the diarist was impressed by the decorative effects created by a "perspective upon his wall in his garden" and also "with the perspective in the closet."⁸ This painting, some two metres high, was hidden behind a closed door, which, when opened by the owner, prompted an amazed response from the viewer as it first appeared to deceive the eye. The amusement value was clear. Nine years later, John Evelyn tells of a room called Paradise, in Hatton Garden, London, that "was furnished with the representations of all sorts of animals handsomely painted on boards or cloth and so cut out and made to stand and move, fly, crawl, roar, and make their several cries, as was not unpretty."⁹ It can be easily imagined that the jump from depictions of animals to human beings was not very difficult.

The origins and circumstances of the early production of dummy board figures are subject to conjecture as the evidence is scarce, but an argument can be established to show that they probably derived generally from the interests expressed above, and specifically from three varied, but connected sources, which appear to be linked. The first is the use of these deceptions in the creation of stage sets for the theatre, or other

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displays such as those mentioned by Evelyn above. Second, is the interest in various perspective effects and other aspects of illusion in art, especially trompe l'oeil, that were particularly developed in the seventeenth century. Thirdly there is the probable extrapolation of “fixed” or shadowy figures from paintings of Dutch interiors.

The social conditions surrounding the production of dummy boards can also guide our responses. From the early sixteenth century, artists had enjoyed producing visual games in which the viewer is first dislocated, then surprised, and finally amused as the confusion is resolved. Anamorphic images for example, where the viewer is initially deceived, but the truth is eventually revealed, are a sophisticated example of this game. The dummy boards were appealing to a similar taste, although their appeal may have been more general than the specific scientific examples.

Whether the intended audience was cosmopolitan or parochial, the manipulation of appearances, and tricks of perception were part of a wider and continuing interest in wit as a psychological and literary convention.¹⁰ In the case of dummy board figures, the willing suspension of disbelief, in conjunction with an active imagination, combined to create a playful object that at its best was also a work of art, as well as a delightful distraction for the viewer. In addition there is an element of entertainment on the part of a knowing audience who set up the joke and watched the trick unfold.

As has been intimated, the origin of the figures can be partly located in the traditions of trompe l'oeil and painted perspectives. Cut-out dummy figures are distant descendants of these painterly traditions of beguiling the mind, reflecting the status of the owner and providing amusement, once the illusion is discovered. This intention was already developed in the decorative arts, in the works of sixteenth century Italian intarsia craftsmen.¹¹ Although the painterly tradition can be traced back to Roman works, the particular images relating to the development discussed can

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be found in such works as Paolo Veronese's frescos in the Villa Maser at Barbaro (near Treviso) made in the 1560s, where figures appear to be standing in half-open doorways. Another example is the series of painted figures on a stairwell in Trausnitz Castle at Landshut in Bavaria. Decorated between 1575 and 1579 by Frederik Sustis this set of trompe l'oeil images is intended to outwit and amuse the viewer at the same time.¹²

By the seventeenth century, there were many and varied attempts to represent the material world by illusory methods with the specific intention of deluding the viewer. The writings of Emmanuel Tessauro, (1592-1675) especially his II Cannocchiale Aristotelico (1670), explained how, "through certain proportions of perspective, with strange and ingenious appearances, [works can] make you see what you do not see."¹³ Examples related to interiors include the Frenchman, Jean-Baptiste Monnoyer (1636-1699), who painted urns of flowers set in niches as over-door illusions. In Italy, Bartolommeo Bettera (1634-1700) painted a Still Life with Musical Instruments, including a representation of a carpet which had been impressed with woven material to give it a real texture and shadow, and in the Palazzo Azurara, Portugal, the staircase is decorated with armed pikemen who are created out of shaped azulejos tiles. Further examples of these processes include imitation paint finishes such as marbling or graining decorative woodwork and three-dimensional chantourné pictures.¹⁴ These were usually cut-out trompe l'oeil works, often including a physical mixture of illusion and reality. The famous examples by Cornelius Gysbrechts and Antonio Forbera witness the extraordinary images that both beguile and delight the eye and the imagination with representations of the painters easel, complete with palette, maulstick and paints, as well as the canvas being worked upon.¹⁵ Once this

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form of picture was made into an animal or life-size human shape the dummy board had been born, i.e. they came off the wall.

A parallel development that clearly had an influence on the production of the dummy board figures were simulated figures used for stage sets. The Renaissance architect Sebastiano Serlio, active in the mid-sixteenth century, suggested the use of figures placed on stage whilst the scenery was being changed. He specified that the figures “must be made of pasteboard, cut out round and painted, signifying such things as you will.”¹⁶ He particularly suggested musicians and soldier figures who could be displayed with accompanying music, and in some cases be manoeuvred across the stage. Interestingly, Serlio condemned the use of painted figures upon the stage-set itself “unless they were asleep”,¹⁷ as he thought the illusion was lost if they appeared still for too long. This was probably true as the crucial element of surprise soon vanishes. In any event they were clearly a useful Renaissance theatrical device. One hundred years later, in 1738, Jean-Nicholas Servandoni set up a stage at the Tuileries depicting St. Peter’s in Rome in which “several representations of figures on their knees contributed to the illusion.”¹⁸ Among the most convincing evidence of the use of cut-out figures created for illusory theatrical purposes is that found in the diary of John Evelyn. In 1644 he visited the count de Liancourt’s palace at St. Germain, Paris. At the end of a “perspective garden” was a theatre “which is made to change with divers pretty scenes, and the stage so ordered, that with figures of men and women painted on light boards, and cut out, a person who stands underneath makes to act as if they were speaking by guiding them and reciting words in different tones as the parts require.”¹⁹

It is also clear that the importance of theatrical perspective and lighting effects, especially shadows, were recognised at this time, and clearly continued to

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contribute particularly to the effectiveness of dummy board illusions set up in domestic spaces.

The fascination with the fictive and the real in the seventeenth century mind are nowhere better explored than in the masque, in which illusion and reality are often fused. The wearing of masks, the audience participation and the technical achievements of stagecraft were all crucial to the effects achieved. Following the severance of a friendship, the playwright Ben Jonson criticised the architect and stage designer Inigo Jones as the purveyor of the “mere perspective of an Inch board.”²⁰ Although likely to be a reference to his stage work as a masque designer, the pejorative nature of the remark may not have been lost on contemporary readers, and the reference to “inch boards” may be a reference to forms of cut-out figures.

Materialism

Dummy boards are a small reflection of materialism in society.²¹ Svetlana Alpers has noted that “the visual culture [of 17th century Holland] was central to the life of society. One might say that the eye was a central means of self representation and visual experience, a central mode of self consciousness.”²² Visual culture clearly reflects society and its interests. Alpers points this out: “In Holland if we look beyond what is normally considered to be art, we find images proliferate everywhere. They are printed in books, woven into cloth of tapestry or table linen, painted onto tiles.”²³ And continuing her list it could be suggested-dummy boards. It is no coincidence that these figures were part of the domestic interior where an individual home-owner might be “on display” both literally and metaphorically. Therefore, the home and its furnishing was clearly important as an actuality and as a self-representation.²⁴ A contemporary merchant Asselyn explained this attitude: “My home is my ornament.

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My house my best costume. Therefore my treasury and my coffers are open, and what my house needs I hasten to buy.”²⁵ This self-conscious representation of the owner through his possessions, which was often the subject matter of trompe l’oeil paintings, featuring letter racks or bookshelves for example, could be extended to three-dimensional representations of self and others. Although it is not common to find examples of dummy board figures that represent actual people, there is some evidence to suggest that both individual portraits and multiple images were produced (see below). The seventeenth-century obsession with fashion, taste and wit would explain a demand for the latest indoor amusement, and if a simulation of the home owners, their children or servants, as a material presence could be created even when absent, the opportunity was probably too good to miss. Clotilde Misse pointed out the obsession for imitation in this culture: “Mais tandis que Pieter de Hooch et Vermeer exaltaient dans leur ‘Intérieurs’ recueillis et vivants le culte d’une race patriarcale pour l’intimité. La boîte de Hoogstraten, comme les maisons de poupée du Rijksmuseum, flatte un fétichisme mesquin qui adore le simulacre de son objet.”²⁶

The idea of the simulacrum is particularly useful here as it is defined as a “shadowy likeness” or deceptive substitute. This is exactly what dummy board figures are.

Wit and Amusement

The third part of this analysis of the place of dummy boards in a wider context is the notion of amusement. There is no doubt that in the period under review, especially in England, there was a pervading sense of the amusing, the whimsical and the eccentric which manifested itself in a variety of ways.²⁷

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These range from Restoration plays where actors present characters who are constantly disguising their feelings, affecting fashionable and exaggerated behaviour and so on; to more fragile examples such as puzzle jugs, where the unwary drinker gets wet unless he knows how to handle the tricky pot. Other examples of ceramic whimsy might include a tureen in the shape of a bunch of asparagus, a plate looking like a sole and a complete faux salmon on a salver. We can rely on Pepys to give another example of domestic amusement. When he visited Sir William Battens he noted that “among other things he showed us a chair, which he called King Harry’s chair. Where he that sits down is catched (sic) with two irons that come round about him which make good sport.”²⁸ One particular example that is close to the dummy boards is told by Ned Ward in 1703. He described a visit to a London waxworks where a country yokel was also visiting. The yokel doffed his cap when he saw the figures and said he couldn’t go in amongst such fine people. He then asked why they didn’t speak and was told that he must speak first. He did this by asking questions to the model figures which immediately caused the other visitors to be highly amused.²⁹

Dummy boards clearly fit into this category well. Houbraken tells of a gentleman who for a joke placed a dummy board at the door to the salon where guests were received. Some of the guests took the figure for a servant and tried to give it a tip, but the board’s hands remained by its sides and it then became an occasion for laughter.³⁰ However, the best example to illustrate the amusement value of the dummy board figure is found in the diary of Sally Wister of Philadelphia written in 1777. She recorded the following incident:

“We had brought some weeks ago a British grenadier from Uncle Miles on purpose to divert us. It is remarkably well executed, six feet high, and makes a

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martial appearance. This we agreed to stand at the door...with another figure, a Turk, that would add to the deceit”.

She continues with an explanation that the gentlemen of the house were wanted at the door, and that the chief victim of the prank was to be a Captain Tilley. She continues

“They all arose and walked into the entry, Tilley first. The first object he saw was a British soldier. Then a thundering voice said “Is there a rebel officer here?” , Tilley darted like lightning at the front door, through the yard and over the fence. Swamps, fences, thorn-hedges and ploughed fields no way impeded his retreat. He was soon out of hearing. The woods echoed with “Which way did he go?” Stop him! We females ran down to join the general laugh. Figure to yourself this Tilley, of a snowy evening, no hat, shoes down at heel, hair unty’d flying across meadows, creeks and mud-holes. Flying from what? Why, a bit of painted wood!”³¹

Apart from this simple amusement deriving from surprise, another effect might have been made with these shadowy figures. A number of the extant figures are represented in costumes of the sixteenth century. It is not too much to speculate that this was also a deceit designed to fool the onlooker and in some cases create an apparently ghostly image from the past. The discrepancy between image and probable fabrication date was noticed as long ago as 1926, when furniture historian, Margaret Jourdain speculated on a particular board that “from the character of the faces it seems probable that the figures are not of the date represented.”³²

Dutch Origins

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Many Dutch artists from the sixteenth century onward had been working to represent the daily life of bourgeois society, its members, and their possessions, and in some cases making comment thereupon. In particular, they had an interest in perspective and illusion with an emphasis on trompe l'oeil. These varied elements were combined in many paintings which included portraiture, material possessions and perspectival interiors,³³ and they often developed a connection between painting and matters of wit, deceit and subsequent pleasure. Johan De Brune developed the idea of the ancient Greek, Gorgias, whose maxim stated that “he who practices deception is more just than he who does not, and he who had yielded to deception is wiser than he who does not.”³⁴ In 1644, De Brune wrote: “This is also the case with paintings, since theirs is a pleasurable and harmless deception. For to wonder at things which are not there as if they were, and to be so taken with them that we convince ourselves, without harm, that they do exist, how can that not bring pleasure to our spirits? Certainly it delights someone beyond measure when he is deceived by a false likeness of things.”³⁵

These ideas were widely developed in seventeenth century Holland, none more so than through the work of the well-known artist, Samuel van Hoogstraten (1627-1678), whose famous perspective boxes often show a group of rooms, plus a shadowy figure silhouetted in a rear window. The artist's View Down a Corridor (Dyrham Park, Avon) has the same feature recurring; a shadowy figure halfway down the enfilade of rooms.³⁶ This apparent simulation was taken to its logical conclusion by the gradual development from shadowy two-dimensional and miniature figures to full-size three-dimensional models.

The process developed through the work of Cornelius Gysbrechts, who painted trompe l'oeil works with an actual wood panel display ground, thus giving a three-dimensional look to the work. He eventually dispensed with the painted ground

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entirely and only depicted objects in cut out form. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the liberation of the figures from their two-dimensional spaces based on “three-dimensional” works such as practices by Gysbrechts gave birth to dummy board figures in the Low Countries. In fact, in 1712, The Spectator discussed national characteristics in art. The author of the article noted that “Italy may have the preference of all other nations for history painting; [and] Holland for drolls and a neat and finished manner of painting.”³⁷ The reference to drolls in the context of this investigation is useful, as during the late seventeenth century a “Dutch droll” was a little chap, and the word also has connotations of caricature and “playing the fool.”³⁸

The first literary evidence associating Dutch painters to the craft of dummy-board painting is from Arnold Houbraken who in 1719 said that these figures were “imaginaries with the most perfect ingenuity, executed with the greatest naturalness...Cornelius Bisschop and his genre made the first if not the best.”³⁹ Cornelius Bisschop (1630-1674) was, according to Houbraken, the first to think of “making painted cut out figures to place in corners or at the end of a vestibule ...[so that] one might have greeted them like a living person. Certain ones, destined to be viewed at night, were fitted with a lit candlestick to create a natural effect.”⁴⁰ Although Houbraken credits Bisschop with the “invention” he also comments on Hoogstraten’s contribution to the genre. Writing about the painted “eye-foolers” in Hoogstraten’s studio he says:

“Here an apple, pear or a lemon in a dish rack, there a slipper or shoes painted on a cut out panel and placed in the corner of the room or under a chair. There were also dried, salted fish on a nail behind the door, and these were so deceptively painted that one could easily mistake them for actual dried fish.”⁴¹

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Although not explicit, it seems clear that reference is being made to the amusing qualities offered by the cut out figures. The intention to deceive and then cause amusement seems to have been one of the main objectives of the figures. It is recorded that even Rembrandt (1606-1669) painted a life-sized portrait of his maid, which was intended to be placed in an open window “and in this manner deceiving all passers-by”.⁴² Roger de Piles (1635-1709) who eventually acquired the figure, said that “the ultimate goal of painting is not so much to beguile the mind as to deceive the eye”.⁴³ It is clear that these figures achieve that goal at least.

Production

Most dummy boards follow a standard method of production, although the quality and style can vary quite considerably. Dummy board figures are usually made from three components, the board itself, the painted finish and the support. The first boards used were up to 1.5 inches thick and rarely less than three quarters of an inch thick. In early cases they were likely to be of oak or pitch pine, all in one piece; in later ones they could be of beech, mahogany or other timber, often in a jointed form. It is usually the case that the later the board, the thinner the timber. The artist probably sketched an outline onto a board then the joiner cut it to shape and feathered the edge, the feathering or bevelling being necessary to create the illusion. Once cut, two or three washes of boiling linseed oil were applied, followed by a rubbing down with distemper or powdered white lead mixed with parchment paste. The colours were painted over this base, the distemper soaking up the excess oil and increasing the brilliance of the paint. The boards were then varnished and burnished.

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Although some well-known artists appeared to have painted a number of figures (see above) it was sign-writers or trade-painters that probably produced the majority. These naïve interpretations of high-style trompe l'oeil were disdained by contemporary commentators. In 1719, Houbraken noted that “one doesn't see much now except the daubs made by the fumlbers and bunglers who badly imitate the previously mentioned masters.”⁴⁴ But a reasonable living might be made as a contemporary deed indicates that Houbraken himself received 21 florins for three dummy boards, and his elder children continued the trade after his death.⁴⁵

One historian has asserted that “until the 1760s professional portrait painters decorated the majority of dummy boards; their work is recognised by life-like poses and vivacious expressions.”⁴⁶ Although this assertion may be incorrect, the cut-off date of 1760s has been carefully used because in 1763 by-laws were passed in London which were designed to prohibit the use of hanging [painted] signs. Obviously this would leave sign painters with little to do, so it may be probable that they turned to dummy board figure painting and similar work with renewed vigour.⁴⁷ However, sign-painters had been working in this field before as is shown by a letter sent by one such painter Tim Bobbin, to his client Mr. Rudd, dated 1755. The letter gives a clear idea of both the design process and the method of sale.

“I send you enclosed for your approbation the draughts, or designs of seven heads- No. 7 is a squddle chub-faced mortal, which Mr. Thomas Scholes and I propose for the drawer [waiter], to be placed on the first landing of the stairs; he has a towel under his arm, and the index finger showing the guest to the room above. This piece ought to be painted on half-inch plane boards and cut out agreeable to the outlines, as deal will be too tender for such work. It ought

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to be at full length, with shoes, buckles etc. It would make an excellent figure but I could not afford it under two guineas, if as large as life.... No 3 and 6 should be placed so as if they were making game on such as are going up stairs; the other four, place as fancy directs, or as will be most agreeable with the light. If they happen to please you, send them back in a frank; if you would have them altered send word how and which of them.”⁴⁸

This reference is important as it mentions the make up of the figure, the style and design, and the all important placement, especially in connection with positions in relation to sight lines and light sources. Although this example shows the maker dealing directly with his client, it seems likely that dummy boards were sold in showrooms as well. In the 1760s, the London upholsterer and paper-hanger, John Potts trading at The Black Spread Eagle, King Street, Covent Garden, advertised on his business card “Ornaments for Halls, Ceilings, Staircases and Chimney boards: at the lowest prices” and illustrated a figure dressed in the costume of Queen Elizabeth I.⁴⁹ The choice of costume and image is a salutary reminder of the discrepancy between date of production and image.

The dummy boards could be designed for a particular place by altering the angle of pose and arranging a suitable support,⁵⁰ or they could be moved to suit occasions as required. Sometimes, when they were planned to be seen at night they would be supplied with lighted candles, and in other cases they might be placed so they were silhouetted against a lighted room, doorway or staircase. For the illusion to be successful, a combination of lifelike painting, judicious positioning and suitable lighting were essential.

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Models and Typology

Although there are quite a number of various models still extant, previous scholars have defined a typology of board figures which embraces most of the types under discussion. The main categories are portrait figures, maids and pseudo-maids, children and soldiers, although there are a number of miscellaneous examples.⁵¹

Individual Portrait Figures

The single adult figure is the most obvious contender for the extrapolation of figures from painted scenes. In some paintings the figures may be interpreted as a reflection, a shadow or a representation of a person. In any event there is an element of mystery established. Like the painted figures, these dummy boards were often depicted as well-dressed and aristocratic in their apparent demeanour and could easily be mistaken for a member of the family. There is some evidence that single figures were intended to represent specific individuals. The Cobham Hall, Kent, inventory of 1672 itemises a “peice (sic) of ye Dutchesse of Richmond at length cut out.”⁵² But the inventory also lists “four [unnamed] cut out pieces to stand upon the stairs.” These anonymous figures were later referred to simply as “painting cut out of a board.”⁵³ Other more apocryphal references to well-known painters, such as Van Dyke, who were credited with the creation of dummy board figures of servants or nurses who took their fancy, are very unlikely.⁵⁴

It has already been established that although the single figures are often well dressed, the costume is not always of the time of production. The evidence from dress and accessories as examples of material reality may be misleading. Amoret Scott has dated an example of a figure from Sudeley Castle, Gloucestershire, as being from the

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1590s.⁵⁵ This dating is based on the dress of the figure, but the representation may in fact be a witty reference, reflecting the example described on Pott's trade card, above. The ghostly images and the potential of a double illusion is clear.

Maids and Pseudo Maids

One of the most numerous groups of figures are the so-called "sweeping maids". The figures are apparently of maids, but upon closer inspection, the trappings of a lady of quality can be seen. The jewellery, dress, and lace work all portray a hidden figure beneath the apron and brush. The latter two details also represent the domestic aspects, which were often seen in Dutch paintings. The evidence of borrowing images from Dutch interior paintings which portray sweeping maids, often silhouetted within a door frame, is again clear. In addition, the habit of women of quality wearing aprons was apparently not uncommon. In 1741 the Countess of Hartford mentioned the custom in passing when discussing the awkwardness of hoop dresses: "since I do not feel at home in my own house without an apron."⁵⁶

If the London Spy of 1703 is to be believed, the use to which these "sweeping maids" were put was not only for amusement. Whilst describing figures in the Tower of London he compares "a grenadier painted in his proper colours, cut out with as much exactness upon a board as the pictures of a housewife with her broom, very usually set up in great families as a good example to servant wenches to make "em mindful of their cleanliness."⁵⁷ Although this interpretation may appear to be rather fanciful, ideas of wit, materialism and illusion are immediately conveyed to the reader. The obvious amusement value of apparently seeing a maid, then realising it was a lady, and then furthering the deception by the object being a dummy board, was completely in character with the desire for amusements like this in the seventeenth

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and early eighteenth centuries. In some cases extant examples of the figures are near-identical. Ferguson asks “who was the fair lady with the bright brown eyes, smiling cherry lips and hands of unusual delicacy, who sat for the Lullingstone Castle, Stoneleigh Abbey and Canterbury “Pretty Housemaids?””⁵⁸ There is also at least one example of a companion piece which represents vanity rather than diligence. Is this another example intended to make servants “mindful”?

In any event, figures of actual maids were also depicted in more obvious servant roles. These included representations of maids undertaking tasks such as sweeping, preparing vegetables and serving tea. For example, in the 1710 inventory of Dyrham House, Avon, there is recorded a figure of “a woman pareing of an apple” sited in the Ante-hall.⁵⁹ The figures can again be seen to represent aspects of illusion, wit and materialism.

Children

In 1874 H. Syer Cuming wrote about a board which showed that the power of the dummy board to surprise and amuse remained well into the nineteenth century. He recorded how he saw a figure that, “purported to be a Dutch child, in standing posture, with a cap on its head, and clothed in a long dark coloured pelisse. Never shall I forget the impression made on me when confronting this little gentleman for the first time, whom I took for the instant to be a living juvenile dressed up in the garb of the seventeenth century.”⁶⁰ Dummy board figures of children are often represented in pairs. They are often dressed in fine garments, and were the epitome of the “little adult”. In 1895 R. S. Ferguson described a pair at Easton Neston in Northamptonshire:

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“They are painted on canvas (thus differing from most or all of the other figures) and the canvas is neatly cut to the required shape and mounted on a wooden panel of exactly the same size.[there follows a lengthy and detailed description of the figures and their dress] It has been asserted that figures of children such as these, and those of the lady and gentleman at Knole and some others were fire screens, but there is no evidence that this was their use, and it is unlikely that figures so well painted as these should have been exposed to such heat as that use would cause.”⁶¹

Nevertheless, it was quite possible that the figures could have stood in the fireplace during the summer months as a version of the devant la cheminée, although this use would not have derived from Holland, where open fires were uncommon.

Soldiers

As with other types of dummy board figures, the cut-out soldiers have been subject to speculation as to their use. In the case of soldiers this has included recruiting figures, fire screens and targets for firing practice. None of these is proven, and it seems clear that the soldier is the ideal candidate for being a formidable “presence in an empty space.” A number of references confirm that these figures were used as decoys, especially during the eighteenth century, to guard rooms as well as the more remote parts of castles or estates.

Although Sally Wister’s joke (see above) using a grenadier, indicates a witty use of the figures, the deceptive role of the soldier figures as sentinels or guards has already been indicated in the figures in Trausnitz Castle and the Palazzo Azurara staircase. Similar roles can be found elsewhere. The English country estate of Canons Ashby, Northamptonshire, could boast two “centinells painted on wood” in the 1717

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inventory, and the monastery of St. Florian near Linz, Austria had about a dozen soldier figures guarding internal entrances in pairs.⁶²

A useful commentary on the use of soldiers is found in the London Spy written in 1703. Talking about dummy board figures of soldiers “guarding” the Arsenal in the Tower of London,⁶³ Ned Ward described how “at the corner of every lobby and turning, of the staircase leading to the Arsenal” at the Tower “stood a wooden grenadier painted in his proper colours cut out with as much exactness upon a board as the picture of a housewife with her broom.”⁶⁴ He continues to explain, in rather crude terms, how they were produced, indicating something of a batch production system: “Though there were several figures, yet the painter thro’ the narrowness of his fancy, had made their postures and their faces so exactly alike that it would be as hard for a Moorfields doctor who judge distemper by urine to tell mares piss from maids water as it would be to distinguish one from the other were they not differently posted.”⁶⁵

Conclusion

By the mid-nineteenth century, dummy boards had lost much of their original interest. The illusionistic and witty allusions they once made were no longer relevant. The figures did retain some elements of amusement but their location was more often in public houses, amusement parks or gardens. The less sophisticated use of figures in these situations often included images of soldiers, Jewish pedlars, street players, gardeners, grooms, fishermen and hermits. The passing of the tradition of their use in domestic interiors was noted in 1845, when John Adey Repton commented that “it was formerly the custom in ancient family mansions to introduce a painting which

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represents a chambermaid holding a broom in her hands, which was cut out of a board, and generally placed in a passage, or at the top of the stairs.”⁶⁶

By 1874, it appeared that the situation had deteriorated even further. Syer Cuming wrote: “Though Vauxhall and its hermit have alike disappeared, and the sentry has all but vanished from the staircases and gardens of old fashioned mansions and taverns, a life -sized kilted highlander with sneshin-horn in hand, painted on cut-out board may occasionally be seen at the door of a suburban tobacconist.”⁶⁷

Although it would seem that the original intentions of illusion, materialism and wit had become watered down, and the board figures had become shadows of their former selves, both intellectually and physically, they do appear to have remained in people’s consciousness. In 1874 Syer Cuming concluded some additional notes by saying “These counterfeits of life have had their day, have well nigh vanished from their old haunts and been forgotten; but fashions oft times repeat themselves, and who can tell that there may not be an age of renaissance for picture board dummies”⁶⁸.

This renaissance did not seem to take long. In Ferguson’s article written in 1895, he ended a description of the soldier figure boards, by saying “they are so frequently to be found in inns, tea-gardens and the like places, as to suggest that the veteran had become the host of the inn, or keeper of the tea-garden”.⁶⁹ More interestingly he made a footnote which referred to some interior dummy board figures at Knole. He noted that one figure was purchased within the last thirty years and the other he “thought quite unnecessary to mention , as it is quite modern”.⁷⁰

This remark confirms that the figures were sometimes reproduced as fakes or copies in the later nineteenth century, often in costume of an earlier period or even as an attempts to imitate famous figures of the past⁷¹. This practice has continued sporadically ever since. During the 1920s figures with details copied from family

portraits were produced,⁷² and some interiors today sport dummy boards as part of their decorative accessories.

¹ The term dummy board figure is a nineteenth-century invention, but refers to life-sized, cut out figures on flat boards that are intended to amuse and deceive the eye in a similar way to trompe l'oeil paintings, chantournes, devants de cheminées, etc.. This article refers to images of people, but the range extends to animals and a wide range of inanimate objects. The geographical location is mainly European with an emphasis on Holland and England, and North America. These objects have been the subject of some investigation by historians. The most recent is Clare Graham's short illustrated booklet Dummy Boards and Chimney Boards (Princes Risborough 1988). Other works include the exhibition catalogue Silent Companions, Dummy Board figures of the 17th through 19th centuries Rye Historical society, USA, (1981) and Amoret and Christopher Scott, Dummy Board Figures, (Cambridge 1966).

² This is both an intellectual problem and a simple physical one. The effects of lighting for example.

³ The dates are not rigid. It is clear that dummy boards were used later than 1800 but in these cases were more often found in public rather than private situations.

⁴ Syer Cuming, "On picture board dummies," British Archaeology Association Journal 30, (1874): 66

⁵ See e.g. Patrick Mauries, Le Trompe-l'oeil de l'antiquité au XX^e siècle, (Paris, 1996), Marie-Louise d'Otrange Mastai, Illusion in Art, (New York, 1975); Celeste Dars, Images of Deception, The Art of Trompe l'oeil, (Oxford 1979); Miriam Milman, Trompe l'oeil Painting the Illusion of reality, (London 1983).

⁶ See David Esterly, Grinling Gibbons and the Art of Carving, (London, 1998).

⁷ See for example, Martin Kemp, The science of art: optical themes in western art from Brunelleschi to Seurat, (New Haven and London, 1990).

⁸ Samuel Pepys, Diary, May 29, (1664).

⁹ John Evelyn, Diary, September 23, (1673).

¹⁰ Ernest B. Gilman, The Curious Perspective: Literary and Pictorial Work in the Seventeenth Century (Yale 1978). See esp. chaps. 2 and 3.

¹¹ Well-known examples include the studiolo of the Palazzo Gubbio, now in The Metropolitan Museum of Art N. Y.

¹² Mastai, Illusion in Art, 118-9.

¹³ Cited in Gilman, The Curious Perspective, 78.

¹⁴ From the French chantourner meaning to cut out with a fretsaw.

¹⁵ Cornelius Gysbrechts, Easel, Copenhagen National Museum, and Antonio Forbera, Painter's Easel, Musée Calvet, Avignon.

¹⁶ Sebastian Serlio, Regoli Generali di Architettura, 1545, cited in A. M. Nagle, A Sourcebook of Theatrical History (New York, 1952), 79-80.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Duc de Luynes (Memoires XI, 102) cited in Jaques Wilhelm, "Silhouettes and Trompe-l'oeil cut-outs", Art Quarterly (1953): 298.

¹⁹ Evelyn, Diary, March 1, (1644)

²⁰ Gilman, The Curious Perspective, 65.

²¹ Materialism in this sense means a preference for material goods and services over spiritual values.

²² Svetlana Alpers, The Art of Describing (London 1983), xxv.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Dolls' houses are an excellent example of the idea of simulation.

²⁵ Esther Singleton, Dutch and Flemish Furniture (1907).

²⁶ Clotilde Misme, "Deux "boites-a-perspective" Hollandaises du XVII^e siècle", Gazette des Beaux Arts (1925), 11:166.

²⁷ See John Brewer, Pleasures of the Imagination (New York, 1997).

²⁸ Pepys, Diary, November 1, (1660).

²⁹ Ned Ward, The London Spy, 1703, (Folio Society Edition, 1950), 192-3.

³⁰ Misme, "Deux "boites-a-perspective", 164.

³¹ Matsai, Illusion in Art, 271.

³² Margaret Jourdain, "Dummy Board Figures", Country Life (December 4, 1926).

³³ See e.g.: Pieter De Hooch (1677) Musical party in a Courtyard (National Gallery, London), Samuel van Hoogstraten-(1627-78)-View down a corridor (Dyrham Park, Avon), C. Gysbrechts (1659-78)-Painter's Easel (National Gallery, Copenhagen), C. Bisschop 1630-74 -"Woman peeling an apple"-

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- (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam), Antonio Forbera, Painter's Easel 1686- (Musée Calvet, Avignon), Emanuel De Witte (1616-92) Burgher's interior (Boymans Museum, Rotterdam)
- ³⁴ Jerome J Pollit, Ancient View of Greek Art (1976), 50-52, cited in Celeste Brusati, Artifice and Illusion, the Art and Writing of Samuel Hoogstraten, (Chicago, 1995), 165.
- ³⁵ Johan De Brune, Weststeen der Vernuftten, Amsterdam, (1644), 1.343 cited in Brusati, Artifice and Illusion 166.
- ³⁶ This painting is the same as that seen by Pepys in the London home of Mr. Povey (see above)
- ³⁷ Cited in Bernard Denvir Art Design and Society in 18th century (London, 1984), 118.
- ³⁸ Oxford English Dictionary and drôler (F) meaning 'to play the wag'.
- ³⁹ Clotilde Brière-Misme, "Un petit maître Hollandais: Cornelis Bisschop (1630-1674)" in Oud Holland LXV(1950), 227-240.
- ⁴⁰ Houbraken, Groote schionbourgh der nederlandsche konstchilders en schilderessen 1719, cited in. Misme,(1925),164
- ⁴¹ Houbraken 2:157 cited in Brusati, 165
- ⁴² Matsai, Illusion in Art 193.
- ⁴³ Roger de Piles, cited in Mastai, *ibid*.
- ⁴⁴ Houbraken cited by Misme, "Deux "boîtes-a-perspective" , 165.
- ⁴⁵ Misme, 1950, , "Un petit maître Hollandais " , 40.
- ⁴⁶ Michael Conway, Concise Encyclopaedia of Antiques, 5 (1961), 235.
- ⁴⁷ For sign painters and associated work see 'The nursery and reward of Painters' in James Ayres 'Art of the People in America and Britain,1750-1950',(Cornerhouse Manchester, 1985).
- ⁴⁸ Rochdale Art Gallery, "Enter Tim Bobbin"(February 23- March 23,1980)
- ⁴⁹ Banks Collection, British Museum. Clare Graham considers that dummy boards were probably among the ornaments referred to here. Edward Perry's article "Figures for the Fireplace" Country Life October 3, (1957) is illustrated with a view of the 'Old Chelsea Bun House' which appears to have dummy board figures on display.
- ⁵⁰ The supports were either hooked bars that held the board at a short distance from the wall or a solid plinth that supported the board for free-standing. Later copies (20th century) often used a hinged support in the manner of an easel.
- ⁵¹ This miscellaneous class includes Highlanders, Hermits, Gardeners, Women with children and Maids, Porters and Footmen.
- ⁵² Jourdain, "Dummy Board Figures".
- ⁵³ John Adey Repton, Gentleman's Magazine, December (1845), 590.
- ⁵⁴ R. S. Ferguson, "Picture Board Dummies", Archaeological Journal, LII (1895), 7.
- ⁵⁵ Amoret and Christopher Scott, "Old dummy Board figures", Antique Collector (February 1961), 20.
- ⁵⁶ Percy McQuoid , The Age of Mahogany (1906, reprint New York, 1972), 125.
- ⁵⁷ Ward, The London Spy, 238.
- ⁵⁸ Ferguson, "Picture Board Dummies", 11.
- ⁵⁹ Karin- M Walton, "Inventory of Dyrham Park", Furniture History 22 (1986), 55. In 1742 the figure was referred to as "picture of a girl behind door" In 1871 the figure was moved to the great hall and later to the saloon, where it was photographed in 1916. It is now back in the Ante hall. It is no surprise to see that Dutch genre painters also used exactly the same images.
- ⁶⁰ Syer Cuming, "On Picture Board Dummies", British Archaeological Journal, 30, (1874), 67.
- ⁶¹ Ferguson, "Picture Board Dummies", 14
- ⁶² Syer Cuming, "Additional Notes on Picture-Board Dummies", British Archaeological Association Journal, Vol 30 (1874), 326.
- ⁶³ The Tower was already a tourist attraction by this time.
- ⁶⁴ Ward, London Spy , 238.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 239. The passage has been bowdlerised in the Folio Society edition.
- ⁶⁶ Repton, Gentleman's Magazine, 590.
- ⁶⁷ Cuming, (1874), p. 70
- ⁶⁸ Cuming (1874), p.327
- ⁶⁹ Ferguson, "Picture Board Dummies", 4/5
- ⁷⁰ Ferguson, p. 20.
- ⁷¹ These figures include George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, King William and Queen Mary.
- ⁷² A & C Scott, (1966), p. 14