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The Work of Art and Its Beholder

The Methodology of the Aesthetic of Reception

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CURIOUS to see what effect it would have, K. went up to a small side chapel near by, mounted a few steps to a low balustrade, and bending over it shone his torch on the altar-piece. The light from a permanent oil-lamp hovered over it like an intruder. The first thing K. perceived, partly by guess, was a huge armoured knight on the outermost verge of the picture. He was leaning on his sword, which was stuck into the bare ground, bare except for a stray blade of grass or two. He seemed to be watching attentively some event unfolding itself before his eyes. It was surprising that he should stand so still without approaching nearer to it. Perhaps he had been sent there to stand guard. K., who had not seen any pictures for a long time, studied this knight for a good while, although the greenish light of the oil-lamp made his eyes blink. When he played the torch over the rest of the altar-piece he discovered that it was a portrayal of Christ being laid in the tomb, conventional in style and a fairly recent painting. He pocketed the torch and returned again to his seat.¹

In this passage from Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, everything has in fact been mentioned that comprises the aesthetics of reception, all of the elements, in other words, on which this theory is based and built. There is a work of art, a painting, which has a location, in a church, in a side chapel, and on an altar. There is a beholder who wants to see the painting and who takes appropriate steps in order to do so. He is disposed, not only because of the environment that he and the work of art share, but also because of his inner preconditions – as a beholder he has a specific gender, presence, and history. Yet the same conditions

also hold true for the work of art: From the few details supplied, we can conclude that the painting once had, and still also has, other functions than the straightforward desire to be observed in the manner described above. The suggestion of the painting's alternative *raison d'être* represented by the oil lamp, the "eternal light," is felt to be distinctly unsettling to its recipient. One could argue, then, that the work of art and the beholder come together under mutually imbricated spatial and temporal conditions. Apart, these conditions are not clinically pure and isolatable units. Although their coming together may be ill-starred, a mutual recognition of each other is assured. In the same way that the beholder approaches the work of art, the work of art approaches him, responding to and recognizing the activity of his perception. What he will find first is a contemplating figure on the other side of the divide. This recognition, in other words, is the most felicitous pointer to the most important premise of reception aesthetics: namely, that the function of beholding has already been incorporated into the work itself. The text suggests just how much time could be spent "illuminating" this fact, while an attention, say, to either the work's content or style can no longer retain a comparable attraction. Kafka's parable provides us with a clue to the allure of reception aesthetics: What his archetypal beholder really felt while contemplating the work remains eternally unspoken.

Whenever the consideration of reception has come to the fore in art-historical research, it has usually been in the form of studies devoted to the historical reception of works of art. Reception *history*, however, issues a methodology distinguishable from that employed in reception *aesthetics*. Let us first consider several approaches to the practice of reception history.

Reception Histories/Psychologies

(1) In the history of reception, there is a school of thought that pursues the migration and transformation of artistic formulas through different artistic contexts and historical periods. In its positivist applications, it procures data and establishes earlier influences. It researches the reasons that were decisive in the selection of certain motifs, and it analyzes the differences that inevitably come to exist between the "original" and its later "after-images." Derived from the recognition of how artists work every day, inheriting traditions that they then make their own, Harold Bloom (1973) in the arena of literary studies and, following him, Norman Bryson (1984) in the realm of visual arts each developed the idea of the drama of succeeding generations who labor under "an anxiety of influence." According to this branch of reception history, creative misunderstanding does not simply occur; given specific historical circumstances, it is both a deliberate and a necessary attitude.

(2) In contrast to this work-specific procedure, a different branch of reception history deals with the written (and, in a very restricted way, the oral) reactions of both beholders and users of works of art. Even if purely literary-

historical goals are not foremost (such as in the intellectual history of art criticism, of writings on art, etc.), one could still expect to find in these kinds of studies contributions to a history of taste and insights into the interaction between art production and art criticism in the broadest sense. Although such an approach has often been valued as highly promising (Bal and Bryson 1991: 184–8), it remains problematic because literary testimonials have only a limited value as sources with regard to the reception of visual art, since they are above all beholden to their literary mission and can only be expressed through that genre. Furthermore, there is the added problem that no one will ever be able to construct a comprehensive art-historical method for deciphering reception/historical statements, given that we possess such sources only for a minimal number of works of art, and also because whole art-historical eras remain silent in this respect.

(3) There is one trend in reception theory that would like to be considered as the authentic history of taste. This particular domain of research analyzes the factual reception of works of art by monitoring the art trade, the theft and destruction of art, and the enterprise of collecting. This approach must, however, be understood as only part of a more general program, which has as its main object the institutional forms of art reception. In this wider framework, the history of collecting art is accompanied by histories of collections, of museums, of exhibitions, of galleries, of the art trade, and of the presentation and placing of works of art, as well as by historical studies of the institutionalized behavior exhibited toward works of art.

(4) A further line of demarcation has to be drawn between the aesthetics of reception and the psychology of reception. The latter may study the spectator as its focus, yet it regards the process that occurs between the beholder and the work of art as a physiological or a perceptive one. Along with the aesthetics of reception, perception psychology shares the conviction that the work of art is based upon active completion by its beholder (see Gombrich's "beholder's share," for example) – that is to say that a dialogue occurs between the partners. Psychological studies place this dialogue, however, on the level of a construct created by an exchange between the organ of perception and the form of the work. As a consequence, this kind of approach necessarily entails an ahistorical way of proceeding. To put it more exactly, this approach removes the process of reception from the conditions of reception. It almost goes without saying that the work of art and the situation of reception make many more specific offers to the beholder than would arise through formal articulation. And the beholder, of course, brings more than his or her open eyes to the perception/reception of the work of art.

To be sure, reception aesthetics can benefit from the studies of these neighboring disciplines, and it certainly hopes to be able to contribute its share to them. Cooperation, however, cannot hide the fact that a very fundamental difference in principle exists. Neighboring schools of thought may claim the right to represent the last word in research on actual, individual beholders, not to mention the perceiving public in general. Their interests are aimed at people,

real beholders, be they the artists who appropriate the work of their predecessors, the critics who examine their productions, the collectors who purchase them, or simply the observers whose optical reactions are directed to the work of art. Moreover, the research on beholders is able to study the effect that art institutions have on the aesthetic behavior of the recipients.

Reception Aesthetics

As it is being used here, however, reception aesthetics enacts its interpretive power in a work-oriented fashion. It is on perpetual lookout for the *implicit beholder*, for the function of the beholder prescribed in the work of art. The fact that the work has been created "for somebody" is not a novel insight, proffered by a small branch of art history, but the revelation of a constitutive moment in its creation from its very inception. Each work of art is addressed to someone; it works to solicit its ideal beholder. And in doing so, it divulges two pieces of information, which, considered from a very high standpoint, are, perhaps, identical: In communicating with us, it speaks about its place and its potential effects in society, and it speaks about itself. Therefore the aesthetics of reception has (at least) three tasks: (1) it has to discern the signs and means by which the work establishes contact with us; and it has to read them with regard to (2) their sociohistorical and (3) their actual aesthetic statements. In this context, it is important to point out, as a specific characteristic of communication in the visual arts, that author and recipient do not deal with one another directly, as is the case in the daily occurrence of face-to-face communication. "Author and reader [and beholder] do not know one another, they have only to think of the respective other. In doing so, both carry out an abstraction from the real individuality, as it is present in the factual dialogue" (Link 1976: 12). It should be evident that this work of abstraction is permeated, on both sides, by projections, and that historical and societal ideals about the function and effect of art play a part in it. In this respect, reception aesthetics is prepared to read the appeals and signals that a work of art directs at its beholder.

Today, after a quarter-century of development and testing, reception aesthetics can be viewed as a fully valid apparatus for the study of literature (for general surveys, critical appreciations, and anthologies, see Warning 1975, Link 1976, Iser 1978, Suleiman and Crosman 1980, Reese 1980, Tompkins 1980, Jaus 1982, Holub 1984). Its application to the study of the visual arts, however, seems less assured, although art historians have done some interesting preliminary work in the field. For the most part, the historiography of reception aesthetics in art history will show its use to be erratic. No consistent tradition has been established, only a series of repeated efforts to apply its methodologies. Part of the problem is that reception aesthetics confronts some of the most basic tenets of the bourgeois appreciation of art: those that claim that the work can only be understood by or in itself, by the creative process, or by its producer.

Origins

Of essential historical importance, although not immediately consequential, was the step that Hegel took in his "Lectures on Aesthetics" (published as a book in 1835) by focusing on the relationship between work and beholder as an important factor in his general history of art forms. Whereas eighteenth-century aesthetics had called for the nonrecognition of the beholder as the prerequisite for the most intense effect on the beholder (Fried 1980), Hegel here identifies two modes of being for the work of art, which occur necessarily together, yet in different degrees: These are the existence of the work "for itself" and "for us." Hegel considers their relationships maintained through the historical process, which engenders a "development [of art] for others" in three phases (Hegel 1965, 2: 13ff.). Whereas the "austere style" of the early period remains closed both "to itself" and to its beholder, the "ideal style" of the classical period opens itself "to us" to such an extent that the recognition of our own presence seems like a gift in a moment of abundance, and not at all like an effort to draw us in and entrap us. In the following phase, during the "pleasing style," the "effect on the outer world" becomes purpose and matter in itself. Art no longer lives in and for itself but for its connections to the outer world.

Alois Riegl (1902) followed Hegel's developmental model in his last work on Dutch group portraiture. His large-scale analysis is dedicated not only to the relationship among the depicted subjects but also to the rapport established with the beholder. Riegl's essay must be regarded as the seminal study of reception aesthetics in the field of art history. With regard to architectural analysis, however, August Schmarsow had already led the way. As early as 1893, he had described architecture as a "creator of space" and its "spatial construct" as "living space," as a kind of space which refers to the elemental orientations of human beings and, above all, to their mobility.

After many decades in which stylistic analysis and iconographic studies were the reigning interpretive paradigms in art history, reception aesthetics finally resurfaced in the late sixties (for a methodology, see Kemp 1983). In the meantime, monographic studies have been published that examine the potential of the method for the interpretation of whole eras of art (see Fried 1980, 1990; Stoichita 1993; Shearman 1993; and for an anthology of relevant interpretations, see Kemp 1992).

Contemporary Conceptualizations

In the following section, I will attempt to present the scope of reception aesthetics as it is practiced today: in method, conceptualization, and stages of analysis.

It is not only in the power of works of art that an impression can be made on its beholder. Before the dialogue between work and beholder can even begin to transpire, both are already caught in prearranged interpretive spheres, as we saw in Kafka's parable. We have to distinguish between extrinsic conditions of

access and intrinsic points of reception already in place between the beholder in the church and the beholding knight in the painting. The aesthetic objects are only accessible to both the beholder and the scholar under conditions that are mostly safeguarded by institutions and that, in themselves, require certain patterns of behavior on the part of the recipient. Extrinsic conditions of access comprise, for example, the architectural surround and the corresponding ritual behavior expected by the religious cult, the court, or the bourgeois institutions of art. The task of restoring the work of art to its original environment and its context of comprehension is taken very seriously by reception aesthetics (for case studies, see Kemp 1986, 1994). And it is just as important to discover the processes that can provoke a change in context, that is, not to evaluate the work of art one-sidedly under the conditions of just its first and latest appearance, but to follow work and context throughout the history that they have mutually created. As part of this much more general movement in the humanities – what might be called contextualism – reception aesthetics seeks to revive a sensitivity for relationships among phenomena, to train, above all, other senses, especially the “sense for relationship” (Nietzsche).

The institutions, academic studies, and modern techniques of reproduction in modern art have often formed an unholy alliance, one whose intention is to present their objects as unrelated monads – ubiquitous, homeless, displaced – as aestheticians of the twenties and thirties (Valéry, Benjamin, Heidegger) already realized with some alarm (Wright 1984). The fact that many works of art in modern times were destined neither for a concrete location nor a specific addressee does not suggest, however, that analyses undertaken in the aesthetics of reception are without objects. The consideration of a more open reception situation can have as informative an effect on arriving at an interpretation as the information that derives from context-dependent studies. In a classic study, Brian O’Doherty, for example, has shown what tremendous power of definition is ascribed to the “white cube,” the gallery space which supposedly recedes to the neutral background in order to let the works of art be effective “by themselves”; the same space which in reality has “created” modern art, which was the condition of its possibility, and which, unlike any other institution, has influenced the appearance and reception of modern art even down to its details (O’Doherty 1986). And as far as the works of art that have lost their original destination and appear in new contexts are concerned, it can be stated in a generalized way that the new availability will not succeed in severing completely the old relationships. Two hundred years of the history of art may have removed the work’s ambience – may have severed it from its original forms of presentation and therefore may actually have established it as an art object, after all – yet it will in any case continue to show fossilized remnants of its context markers that position it and the beholder anew. As a historical method of investigation, reception aesthetics is obliged to reconstruct the original reception situation. In this way it can reverse the processes that had colluded to exclude this approach in general from the history of art appreciation and that also, in a parallel development, had isolated the works of art.

To return to the beginning: What we call *conditions of access* on the part of the beholder and institutions could be called *conditions of its appearance* on the part of the work of art. Both are conventional. The work reacts to its spatial and functional context through the means of its medium, through its size, its form, its shaping of the interface or the border between the “outside” and the “inside,” its inner scale, the degree of its finish, and its spatial disposition (i.e., the manner in which it either continues or negates the outer space and positions its beholder). All these mechanisms of transmission and mediation are part of firmly established conventions or result from practical necessities and cannot, or only rarely, be understood as a particular achievement of either a work of art or an artist. Of course the case in which changes of communicative structures occur should be taken very seriously: It could indicate paradigmatic changes in the history of reception, for example. The particular task of interpreting a work of art according to reception aesthetics starts at the point of intersection between “context” and “text”: at the point, that is, where the inner workings of the work of art initiate a dialogue both with its surroundings and its beholders.

I have already pointed out that the work of art, contrary to face-to-face communication, produces asymmetrical communication. This conclusion is a relative one, because the theory of communication does not recognize total asymmetry: It must always posit an opposite partner, must always take into account a common frame of reference. In the case of aesthetic communication, relative asymmetry proves to be the impetus for not only situating the beholder – by way of exterior arrangements as described above – but also for stimulating, for activating the beholder to take part in the construction of the work of art. This activation occurs by working through the way by which the beholder becomes part of the intrapainting communication; more precisely, through the way in which he or she takes part in the communication with which he or she can only be associated as a beholder, not as an actor. The *inner communication*, which we might call representation, composition, or action, consists of “people who give each other signs . . . , things which are signs . . . , events which, in themselves, already are communication or are at least accompanied by communication or which, on the other hand, are the object of communication that is created by the people in the painting” (Bitomsky 1972: 30). In contrast to most kinds of everyday communication, the essential characteristic of aesthetic communication is that its inner exchange takes place under the eyes of the beholders. “Within the medium certain forms have been inserted which organize the perception of the beholders, i.e., the way in which they look at inner communication. Inner communication is *presented* and, in fact, presented in such a way that it not only signifies that which it would signify for the participating actors of inner communication without any beholder, but that it has a supplementary meaning which results directly from the fact that beholders are present” (ibid., p. 105). The opening and presentation of inner communication are achieved by means of a structuring that, depending on whether they address the beholder directly or whether they are conceived for a broader reaction, can be called

precepts of reception or *offers of reception*. The term that is really appropriate in this case, however, is *implicit beholder*: the beholder who is intended by these *inner orientations* and becomes the addressee of the work of art.

Forms of Address

(1) First of all, one has to study the way in which things and persons of the intrapainting communication establish relations with one another while at the same time including or (seemingly) excluding the beholder. This process is called *diegesis* (from the Greek, meaning a wide-ranging discussion). Diegesis explains the distribution of the actors on the canvas and/or in the perspective space, the position that they take toward one another and toward the beholder, their gestures and visual contacts. In short the deictic arrangement of the work of art refers to its modes of manifesting communication and orienting its principal communicators.

(2) Many works contain figures who are, more or less, removed from the context of the internal action or communication and who have been thrown onto the side of the beholder (think of Kafka's knight, for example). They become vehicles of identification, figurations of the beholder in the painting, representatives of a *personal perspective*. In narratological terminology, they are the focalizers who can address the beholder directly, as figures that look at him or her, that point to him or her as well as to something else. But they can also proceed more cautiously and guide him or her toward an event, offer him or her their own view, admit him or her into their own ranks. As a third possibility, they can be taken out of the representational context and yet cannot be attributed directly to the beholder: As figures of reflection or diversion, they accomplish more than just pointing or guiding.

(3) The classic means of positioning the beholder is undoubtedly through the use of perspective in all of its manifestations. It is because of perspective – or the spatial composition of the painting in general – that the beholder is situated in relation to the painting, brought into position; a fact that could still be attributed to the demands of the exterior orientation. But perspective achieves more than connecting the space of the beholder with the space of the painting. In the end, it also regulates the position of the recipient with regard to the inner communication; that is to say, the presentation of the painting with its demands on how it should be viewed.

After Riegl's pioneering studies on the Dutch group portrait (1902), it was above all film analysis, without acknowledging Riegl's model, that developed a complex method based on the three aforementioned structural elements, in order to find out about the structure of the inner film world, about the position of the beholder in relation to it, and about the processes of the construction of subjectivity and gender roles (Heath 1981; Burgin 1982; Mulvey in Penley 1986: 57–68). The application of this methodological apparatus very quickly

reaches its limits in art history, because art (except for a relatively short time in the nineteenth century) prefers ideal positions of the beholder to positions of actual individuals and, unlike film, does not build its pictorial worlds from a tightly intermeshed succession of pictures of viewing and pictures of the viewed. This method bears fruit only if it establishes the historical forms of communication of a painting both as a view and as a staged view structure; that is, as both extra- and intradiegetic conditions of view.

(4) The behavior of the beholder is also decisively stimulated by the way in which the artistic scene or action is depicted, in its cropping, its details, its fragments. It is only since the fifteenth century that the painting conceived as a fragment has existed, and only since the seventeenth century has the intensification of this effect as a radical cutting into a presumed preexistent reality been the concern of painters. However, that which was practiced as a valid alternative before the fifteenth century, and, in fact, long after it – namely, the construction of the elements to form the painting – proves to be equally relevant in this context. One could take the view that the intended completeness of the constructed image does not ask for the supplementing of the nonvisible by its spectator. Though completing the incompleting might be one way of beholding a painting, it remains the case that every artistic activity entails drawing a border and defining itself by what it has excluded. If the selection of the painted “fragment” is recognized as an intersubjective strategy, then so too must be the classification of the realm of the visible according to categories such as exposition versus obstruction, accessibility versus inaccessibility. This process depends on whether objects are demonstrably revealed to or hidden from their beholder, whether they let themselves be observed or deliberately elude visibility, just like everything that exists outside the boundaries of the painting (Fontanille 1989).

(5) As the last item of this summary on forms of address, we need to identify the most difficult and, by definition, most intangible category, which can also interact in various ways with the previous four. Literary theory refers to the *blank* or the aesthetics of *indeterminacy*, both conceptualizations meaning that works of art are unfinished in themselves in order to be finished by the beholder (Ingarden 1965, Iser 1978, Kemp 1985). This state of unfinishedness or indeterminacy is constructed and intentional. But it does mean that as spectators we must complete the invisible reverse side of each represented figure, or that we mentally continue a path that is cut off by the frame. In this way, everyday perception is no different from aesthetic perception. The work of art lays a claim to coherence, though, and this impulse turns its “blanks” into important links or causes for constituting meaning. With regard to texts, but also in a process easily applicable to paintings, this means that the blanks “are the unseen joints of the text, and as they mark off schemata and textual perspectives from one another, they simultaneously trigger acts of ideation on the reader’s part. Consequently, when the schemata and perspectives have been linked together, the blanks ‘disappear.’” Blanks can be regarded as “an elementary matrix for the interaction between text and reader” (Iser 1978: 182–3).

An Analysis: Nicolaes Maes's *The Eavesdropper*

Consider a curious drawing that has been recognized for a long time as the work of Nicolaes Maes (1632–93)² (Fig. 28). The scene is sparse: a curtain, which takes up the entire right half, and, set in an interior, an apparently female figure who is oriented toward the right-hand side, toward what is hidden from view behind the curtain. It might be surprising that this drawing, with its minimal repertoire of motifs, served as a preliminary sketch for a painting. The painting itself (45.7 × 71.1 cm), which is signed and dated 1655, simplifies matters for the beholder (Fig. 29).³ The female figure turns out to be the maid, who, coming up from the basement, is pausing, obscured by the newel post. She is obviously eavesdropping on the events which are unfolding in the background, in another room of the house. An extended excursion into iconography and social history could confirm this interpretation and elaborate on it. Maes produced a dozen paintings on the theme of the eavesdropper.⁴ This was his most successful motif in the field of genre painting; in each case the composition was only slightly varied. In terms of both the composition and of reception aesthetics, the figure of the eavesdropper is crucial. Given that she is encoded in multiple ways, the woman clearly belongs to the category of the persona of the beholder, of the personal perspective. She becomes the focus of events by establishing direct eye contact with us from inside the painting. By smiling mischievously and using a gesture that imposes silence, she gives us to understand that we are supposed to behave likewise. Here, the construction of the beholder's presence brings about the extreme possibility of direct interaction. Whether the direct address to the beholder is achieved or not, however, is regulated by artistic conventions which (in a way that remains to be researched) are certainly connected with general norms of behavior.

Present as beholders, we are asked by the eavesdropper to become voyeurs. Such a transformation is suited to the medium. We see and do not hear what the eavesdropper hears but cannot see, and we are only seen by her, our accomplice, but not by the others in the painting. In this way the personified sender, that is, the eavesdropper, is supposed to trigger in the beholder two simultaneous reactions: a particular way of behaving and the shift to visuality. It thus becomes apparent what happens when part of the inner communication functions as a precept of reception. One might almost think that the woman would have to give up her eavesdropping because she is so preoccupied with us. This double role has its price, and here lies the critical point of forced relationships between the painting and its beholder.

It is the eavesdropper's task to make us participate in a communication of which neither she nor we are a part. That is what gives the painting such an exemplary character. It affirms the proposition that is true for the painting as such, and it stresses at the same time what matters with regard to the difference between the beheld painting (aesthetic perception) and the everyday event that was eavesdropped on or secretly observed (voyeuristic behavior). As already emphasized, the interior communication in the painting is "presented,



Figure 28. Nicolaes Maes, *The Eavesdropper* (drawing). Pen and ink on paper. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University. Photo from W. Sumowski, *Drawings of the Rembrandt School* (New York, 1984).

and, in fact, presented in such a way that it not only signifies that which it would signify for the participating actors of inner communication without any beholder, but that it has a supplementary meaning which results directly from the fact that beholders are present” (Bitomsky 1972: 105). In the voyeuristic situation, the contrary holds true: Here the situation’s supplementary meaning for the voyeur results from the fact that the participating actors are not aware of his or her presence. Therefore, the re-creation of the voyeuristic situation in the painting is not possible; it is only possible to represent it, and it is this very difference that gives Maes’s painting its name. The eavesdropper is seen by us and, what is more, challenges our perception, a fact that in itself would basically change or diminish her status. In any event, her “supplementary meaning” results from the fact that she sees us and is seen by us: That is to say, there exists a perceptual aesthetic exchange. Furthermore, it is logically consistent that a painting of this kind is called *The Eavesdropper* and not “The Couple that Is Eavesdropped Upon” or something similar, because what is represented above all is the act of eavesdropping itself, and not the interaction which is both eavesdropped upon and observed. Among all the variants that Maes devoted to this topic, the two discussed here speak most plainly in this respect. What is it, after all, that is presented by the eavesdropper in a manner so pregnant with



Figure 29. Nicolaes Maes, *The Eavesdropper*, 1655. 17¹³/₁₆" × 15¹¹/₁₆" (45.7 × 71.1 cm).
Collection of Harold Samuel, London.

significance? In the drawing, there is nothing – nothing that we can see. In the painting, there is little – in both cases the curtain hangs in front of the events.

The fact that this curtain, illusionistically drawn, hangs *in front of* the painting gives us an indication that we are, for the moment, supposed to ascribe it to the outer and not the inner apparatus of the work of art. Its treatment leads us to the conditions where we ought to have started, namely, the conditions of access and appearance. We are confronted with a panel whose function was to decorate the walls of a residence or of a collection. Representations of curtains (or, more generally speaking, veils) in works of art are as old as the tradition of painting itself.⁵ Religious art draws its effect from the dialectic of unveiling and concealing; it deals in cult images hidden in the most holy places – behind curtains, or in shrines or folding altars whose interiors are opened only on high feast days. The first secular art collectors must simply have taken over the custom of veiling: Perhaps they also feared the dangerous luster of the new secular art. During the compilation of an inventory of many hundreds of paintings belonging to Margaret of Austria, who was one of the first art collectors in the North, few were found that were “without veil or cover” (*sans couverture ne feuillet*), as the register from approximately 1530 proclaimed.⁶ When the secular use of paintings and collecting secular art became widespread, the only means of assuring a painting’s survival was to cover it with a curtain. This practice was internationally customary: We find it as far afield as Rome and

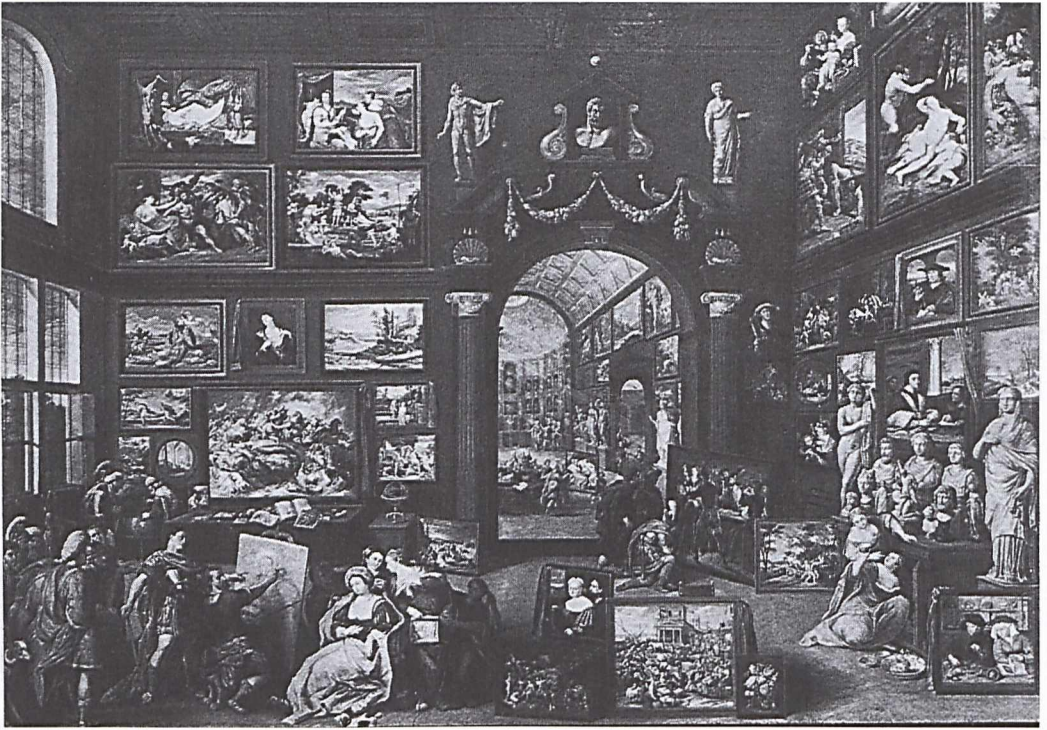


Figure 30. *Willem van Haecht, The Studio of Apelles, 1628. Oil on canvas. Rubens House, Antwerp. Photo courtesy of the museum.*

Antwerp. Seventeenth-century paintings of collections show that there were always some painted works of art that were fitted with such curtains, for reasons of both protection and increasing their aesthetic allure⁷ (Figs. 30, 31).

The first illusionistically painted picture curtain appears in 1644 in a small painting of the Holy Family by Rembrandt, a work of art that was copied several times by Maes.⁸ From that date on, illusionistically painted picture curtains and frames became ever more numerous for the next two or three decades; both are found in Maes's oeuvre. Thus the painted picture curtain quotes a then-common requisite of art collecting: This alone, however, does not tell the whole story. Owing to the very fact that it is painted, the curtain multiplies, so to speak, the context markers of the work of art. It not only draws the painting into the collection, but also the collection into the painting. The painted curtain transforms the work into a piece of art, an act which represented, perhaps not in our eyes but undoubtedly in the eyes of its first owners and beholders, an enormous increase in value, and which really elevated the painting to its proper place and to the level of debate within the whole of the art collection. Deception, subterfuge, optical illusion, and surprise were essential qualities of items in a collection: artistic chairs that, once the unsuspecting user had sat down, did not release him or her; goblets that, once filled to the brim, let escape



Figure 31. *Gabriel Metsu, The Geelvinck Family, ca. 1650. Oil on canvas. Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin. Photo courtesy of Bildarchiv Foto, Marburg.*

lewd substances or retained their contents in a strange way; paintings that conveyed the impression that they were drawn by human hands and were yet found in split rocks or felled trees; still lifes that made their objects palpable and yet were only painted. Their intended effect was not really the illusion but the disillusion, the disillusionment of the beholder. Such deceits brought about surprise, even laughter, but, above all, brought about discussion and argumentation about the numerous modes of reality between appearing and being.

I emphasize this kind of playfulness in order to characterize a historical type of beholder who was not conceived for contemplation, but for dialogue: a beholder conceived for a pleasant exchange between people of his or her own kind and the work of art, a beholder who could also be addressed by the painting in a direct manner. Just consider all of the multilayered aspects of the painted curtain: The painting produces its context as a marker (the work of art has to contribute to the creation of exterior provisions) and as a level of articulation and function (the painting as easel painting and therefore collectible); it

confirms the context by quoting it and thus attracting particular attention (competition among the many paintings on the walls of the collection); and it occupies and/or activates the beholder (illusion, disillusion).

Maes adds yet another function, and again, in doing so, he singles out that decisive point that marks the difference between aesthetic and nonaesthetic perception. He uses the external means of reception, that is, the curtain, in artistic recreation, in order to continue the argumentation (which is at least just as artistic) that has started between the beholder and the events in the painting. This means that he draws the external means to the inside. In terms of developmental history, this is not without importance: The context marker of the painted curtain is really only a shrunken version of the conditions of access, a small memory of all that once was part of the richness of the aesthetic "periphery." Now, demonstrably, this remnant is also made functional for the "center." In the drawing, the curtain blocks everything that would have been there to see or to hear – a great, bold blank. We must add (almost) everything. Not so in the painting. Here, in the sense of the above-mentioned terminology of Wolfgang Iser, the connectability of segments, of determinate and indeterminate elements, is prepared. Here the curtain has been drawn back to such an extent that half of the eavesdropped conversation becomes visible: A woman who stands behind a table and who, judging from the position of her arms, which she has on her hips, and her head, which she holds at an angle, reproaches a person opposite her. If now, as a result of the eavesdropper's invitation, we became active ourselves in the right half of the painting and lifted the curtain or tried to look behind it in our thoughts, the blank would close and we would really become the eavesdropper's accomplices. That this is not possible, or is possible "only in thought" – that by the art's grace we have "only" the painting – is made obvious by the curtain, which, as an everyday instrument of veiling and unveiling, yet belongs wholly and doubly to art by being part of the matter of the painting and, also as the painted curtain, its sign.

Notes

This chapter was translated by Astrid Heyer (University of Western Ontario) and Michael Ann Holly (University of Rochester).

- 1 Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (definitive ed.), trans. from the German by Willa and Edwin Muir, rev., with additional chapters and notes by Professor E. M. Butler (London: Secker and Warburg, 1963), p. 229.
- 2 See most recently W. Sumowski, *Drawings of the Rembrandt School* (New York, 1984), vol. 8, p. 3984.
- 3 Auctioned off on June 23, 1967, at Christie's, London, to Eduard Speelman Ltd., London. Now Collection of Harold Samuel, London.
- 4 Cf. *Beschreibendes und Kritisches Verzeichnis der Werke der hervorragendsten holländischen Maler des 17. Jahrhunderts*, ed. C. Hofstede de Groot, Esslingen, 1915, vol. 6, pp. 520ff. (incomplete list); Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, *Tot lering en vermaak*, exhibition catalog (Amsterdam, 1976), pp. 145ff.; W. R. Robinson, "The Eavesdroppers and Related Paintings by Nicolaes Maes," in *Holländische Genremalerei des 17. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Staatliche Museen, 1987), pp. 283–313; Stoichita 1993: 76–8; Martha Hollander, "The Divided Household of Nicolaes Maes," *Word and Image* 10 (1994): 138–55.

- 5 For painted picture curtains, see P. Reuterswärd, "Tavelförhanget," *Kunsthistorisk Tidskrift* 25 (1956): 97ff.; Musée des Beaux-Arts, *La peinture dans la peinture*, exhibition catalogue (Dijon, 1983), pp. 271ff.; W. Kemp, *Rembrandt: Die heilige Familie oder die Kunst, einen Vorhang zu Lüften* (Frankfurt-on-Main: Fischer, 1986).
- 6 J. Veth and S. Müller, *Albrecht Dürers niederländische Reise* (Berlin, 1918), vol. 2, p. 83. Cf. the publication of the inventories in *Jahrbuch der Kunstsammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses* 3 (1885), pp. xciii ff.
- 7 Cf. the reproduction material in S. Speth-Holterhoff, *Les peintres flamands de cabinets d'amateurs au XVIIe siècle* (Brussels, 1957).
- 8 Kemp, *Rembrandt: Die heilige Familie oder die Kunst, einen Vorhang zu Lüften*.

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