

Dutch Genre Painting (I): To Instruct and Delight



We have seen genre paintings in Flanders. Dutch artists learned from their Flemish counterparts; some Flemish painters moved to Dutch cities.

Brouwer, *Peasants Fighting over Cards*, 1631-35



From Wayne Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting* (2004)

Dutch genre paintings do indeed present a wide variety of subject matter but the scope of what was portrayed is quite limited. The marked parameters of suitable subjects for representation attest to the **conventionality** of this art. The term conventionality ... refers not only to the repetition of specific styles and motifs but especially to the restricted number of themes that artists depicted, ones that were used continually, often over several generations. ... **This should disabuse contemporary viewers of any naïve assumption that seventeenth-century Dutch genre paintings are simple “slices of life” ... (p. 1)**

“Low-life” genre paintings popular in first half of the 17th century,
especially in Haarlem



Judith Leyster, *Merry Trio*,
c. 1630



Jan Miense Molenaer, *Boys with a Dwarf*, 1646

Jan Miense Molenaer
(1610-1668)

- From Haarlem, but spent 1636-1648 in Amsterdam
- Judith Leyster's husband
- Painted portraits and some history paintings, but best known for his genre paintings.
- Comic treatment of peasants and working classes



Jan Miense Molenaer, *Boys with a Dwarf*, 1646

Jan Miense Molenaer, *Boys with a Dwarf*, 1646



“Low Life” Paintings

Made by middle-class artists for (upper-)middle-class customers in the cities, these pictures helped shape civic identities by ridiculing the sorts of people that the owner and primary viewers of such pictures were not. Comic representations were appreciated particularly for their gentle or not-so-subtle reinforcement of social structure and attendant behavioral norms through laughter—in other words, for some of the same reasons our culture relishes and needs stand-up comedians and television sitcoms.

Mariet Westermann, “Jan Miense Molenaer in the Comic Mode,” in Dennis P. Weller et al., *Jan Miense Molenaer: Painter of the Dutch Golden Age* (Raleigh, N.C: North Carolina Museum of Art, 2002), p. 45



Frans Hals, *Malle Babbe*,
1633-35



Painters also created genre scenes around musicians and performers, who belonged to the working class and seen as marginal social characters.

Frans Hals, *Jester Playing the Lute*,
c. 1623



Judith Leyster, *Merry Trio*, c. 1630





Judith Leyster, *Merry Trio*,
c. 1630

Jan Steen, *In Luxury, Look Out*, 1663



Jan Steen, *Self Portrait as Lutenist*,
c. 1652-55



Jan Steen (1626-1679)

- Born and lived in Leiden; attended the university there for a year
- Best known for genre paintings that conveyed moral messages in entertaining ways
- Visually illustrated Dutch sayings in his paintings
- Moved comic paintings into middle-class contexts

Jan Steen, *In Luxury, Look Out*, 1663



Jan Steen, *In Luxury, Look Out*, 1664. Detail



Jan Steen, *In Luxury, Look Out*, 1664. Detail



Throwing roses before
the swine: Dutch
proverb referring to
wastefulness.



A monkey stopping the clock refers to the Dutch saying: "In folly, time is forgotten."

The duck suggests that the old man and woman are talking nonsense.

Jan Steen, *In Luxury, Look Out*, 1664. Detail



Children smoking, stealing; dog eating the family's dinner (sign of a mismanaged household)

Cause of the chaos: The housewife, guardian of the household, is asleep on the job.

Jan Steen, *In Luxury, Look Out*, 1664. Detail.
Objects associated with sickness and punishment.



Jan Steen, *In Luxury, Look Out*, 1664. Detail



Inscription on the
chalkboard: "In
luxury, look out."

Steen, *Dissolute Household*, c. 1663



Steen, *As the Old Sing, So Pipe the Young*, 1650s



Dutch Genre Painting (I)

- Paintings inspired by contemporary life, but are not simply documentary records
- Artists adhered to a restricted range of themes, e.g., comic depictions of working class, moralizing comic themes
- Comic paintings: moral themes expressed through flawed characters
 - “Low-life” pictures show lower classes misbehaving, unable to control their emotions or movements; served as contrast to the middle- and upper-middle-class viewers
 - Jan Steen staged comic chaos in middle-class homes; visually illustrated sayings about moderation and temperance