

A.van Suchtelen a.o., *Nicolaes Maes*, Zwolle (Waanders), 2019 [catalogue of the exhibition in the Mauritshuis Museum, The Hague and the National Gallery, London, 2019-2020].

A.Jansen, J. van der Veen a.o., *Pieter de Hooch in Delft. Uit de schaduw van Vermeer*, Zwolle (Wbooks), 2019 [catalogue of the exhibition in Museum Prinsenhof, Delft, 2019-2020].

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In 2019-2020, Pieter de Hooch (1629-after 1684) and Nicolaes Maes (1634-1693) were honoured with excellent monographic exhibitions and the publication of abundantly illustrated catalogues. Museum Prinsenhof in Delft presented De Hooch as the first of several local masters who will be highlighted in further exhibitions, publishing the results of years of research in the exhibition catalogue. On the other hand, the book about Maes, which accompanied the exhibition in the Mauritshuis, seems to be a critical survey of results that already were available, except for Schapelhouman's careful new study of Maes' drawings. The incentive for organising this event was one of the many Rembrandt years, this time 2019.

Great as the differences between the oeuvres of Maes and De Hooch may be, in both cases mathematical perspective was used in urban genre scenes. Therefore, both artists are combined in this review. The interest in this technique is not the first thing one expects to notice in the work of a pupil of Rembrandt. Nicolaes Maes was trained in Rembrandt's studio during some four or five years before returning to his native town of Dordrecht in 1653, a year in which the master's popularity had already begun to wane. Rembrandt had been the only artist to illustrate biblical subjects in a 'realistic' manner, best known from genre and landscape painting, which had made him exceptional as well as fashionable until classicism became the dominant style.¹ Then Rembrandt had to compete with Jacob Backer and others, experimenting in a completely different manner. In 1648 he signed his *Disciples from Emmaus* and in 1654 the *Bathsheba*, both now in the Louvre. Classicism, in other words, influenced the young Maes from without as well from within the studio where he was educated. Notably, this aspect remains unmentioned in the Mauritshuis catalogue. In The Hague five of Maes' rare history paintings were on show, three of which are large-scale compositions with multiple figures. Studying compositions rather than brush stroke and paint surface, I cannot see *Christ blessing the children* (cat. 1) or *Abraham sacrificing Isaac* (cat. 3) without being reminded of Jacob Backer. Soon enough Rembrandt's lessons in composition were completely forgotten, as Maes' *Lot leaving Sodom* shows (not in exhibition, illustrated on p. 32).

In Dordrecht Maes not only abandoned Rembrandt's style, but he also dropped his master's favourite subjects: tronies, single figured compositions and biblical stories. The young artist chose to be a painter of genre scenes that often show housewives and their maids in upper- or middle-class interiors. Most of his interior spaces are quite simple, but in his 1655 *Housewife and sleeping maidservant* (cat. 9) a *doorkijkje* was inserted to strengthen the narrative

¹ A survey of Dutch seventeenth-century history painting and a discussion of Rembrandt's place in its development: L. Vries, *Stories in gilded frames. Dutch seventeenth-century paintings with Biblical and mythological subjects*, Amsterdam 2016 (also available in Dutch: *Verhalen in Vergulde Lijsten*).

element of the composition.² The combination of both spaces is not convincing, and the foreground shows that Maes did not yet understand that the tiled floors in Delft church interiors formed the basis of the mathematical construction. In my opinion, the four paintings with *Eavesdroppers* (cat.16-19), of which two are dated 1655, clearly demonstrate that Maes was not interested in linear perspective. *Houding* (the contribution of colours to the suggestion of three-dimensionality) and *reddering* (the contribution of light and dark to the suggestion of three-dimensionality) of his dark and glowing palette were enough to suggest the spatial relations in the interiors he depicted.³ Therefore, the *Eavesdropper* (cat. 19) of two years later comes as a complete surprise. Five *doorkijkjes* are combined in a complicated perspective construction and the daylight brightens most of the fragmented background. This abundance of details, and the increased distance between the figures weaken the composition's narrative element. After this *tour de force* Maes stopped making genre scenes. The time-consuming use of mathematics made the production of paintings extremely costly, whereas portraiture promised more earnings with less trouble.

Understandably, mathematical perspective was unpopular among genre painters, but in 1657 it was not difficult to find inspiring examples for its use in interior spaces. In 1650 the Delft painter Gerard Houckgeest and others had begun to depict church interiors in the framework of an elaborate construction. Soon enough genre painters learned how to use a simpler form of this technique in their own compositions. Among them are Samuel van Hoogstraten (b. 1627), Pieter de Hooch (b. 1629), Johannes Vermeer (b. 1632), and Nicolaes Maes (b. 1634). The question who preceded who is left aside as far as possible by the authors of both catalogues. Ariane van Suchtelen states that the work of Maes was a source of inspiration for De Hooch, Vermeer, and Van Hoogstraeten, without giving her reasons (pp. 55, 70). Anita Jansen limits herself to the observation that Gerard Houckgeest and other painters of church interiors 'exercised great influence' on some genre painters in the Southern part of Holland (p. ...). Here we must limit ourselves to the relation between De Hooch and Maes.

The best works by Pieter de Hooch are characterised by a subtle harmony between space, light, and human figures. This quality is strengthened by the use of mathematical perspective, as goes forth from six paintings dated 1658, in which the basis of the linear construction is seen in the square tiles of the floors. De Hooch's creativity and innovation in this year did not come overnight: everything apart from the linear construction had already been developed in his slightly earlier courtyards (cat. 6, 7). Maes' *Eavesdropper* of 1657 predates De Hooch's *annus mirabilis* by just one year and it must have impressed him deeply. But the confrontation cannot have done more than to stimulate a development that was set in motion years earlier.

Initially, mathematical perspective was introduced in the visual arts to make the depiction of reality more reliable. In the seventeenth century it had become one of many tools a painter

² *Doorzicht, doorkijk, doorkijkje*: look-through; distant view, framed by objects close by. The diminutive is mostly used for interior scenes, the other two for landscapes. A list of the technical terms used by Gerard de Lairese in his *Groot Schilderboek* with English translation: L. de Vries, *How to create beauty, De Lairese on the theory and practice of making art*, Leiden 2011, pp. 204-217.

³ *Houding, reddering*: See previous note. Also: L. de Vries, *Jacob Campo Weyerman and His Collection of Artists' Biographies. An Art Critic at Work*, Leiden 2020, pp. 100-109.

could choose from when he wanted to create a convincing suggestion of space. Therefore, it is fascinating to see, not how the linear perspective was constructed where it was applied, but how the painter manipulated it. Both aspects get due attention in the book on De Hooch. He could make perspective do what he wanted, without breaking its rules too drastically. De Hooch never would use perspective to show his virtuosity, giving a leading part to what was meant to be just a tool. Samuel van Hoogstraeten on the other hand was a real virtuoso in the use of perspective, as the largest of his peepshows in London demonstrates. This box, with as many look-throughs as the painter could get in, and with spectacular anamorphoses, must have been made when Van Hoogstraeten lived in his native Dordrecht between 1656 and 1662. In his oeuvre the perspective box is even more exceptional than the 1657 *Eavesdropper* is in that of Maes.⁴ The box, for one thing, is not a genre piece since it contains no narrative elements; it is a piece of architectural painting for which the painter freely borrowed elements from De Hooch's and Maes' interiors, a rather superficial relation. Speculating about the artists' interdependence, one should not forget that most probably each of them was introduced to the secrets of perspective by a professional mathematician, not necessarily the same for all three.⁵

Van Hoogstraeten's peepshow is not a genre painting and De Hooch's and Maes' street scenes, courtyards and interiors are no architectural paintings. Architectural paintings show public spaces in which human figures are used as staffage. Genre painting can be defined as a narrative form of art, located in the artist's own time, revolving around a rather limited number of situations in which stereotyped representatives of social groups interact. Not heeding these definitions causes unnecessary doubts about the question whether a genre scene has a moral message. The interiors and courtyards here under discussion are private areas where human figures play their roles. Maes and De Hooch tell stories that lead to a conclusion about the behaviour of the protagonists. Like all genre painters before and after them, they mocked and ridiculed their personages. Some artists did so very outspokenly; others spoke in a soft and subtle tone, but they all contrasted foolish behaviour with an implicit moral standard. They were holding up human vices and follies to ridicule or scorn.⁶ The refinement of Maes' and De Hooch's storytelling seems to have confused Van Suchtelen, who repeatedly asks herself whether a painting is meant to be moralising or humorous, as if these two exclude each other. Her discussion of the *Sleeping bookkeeper* cat.nr 11 (p. 65) is the clearest example of this problem.

The subjects of both Maes and De Hooch are firmly rooted in traditions reaching back far beyond the beginning of the seventeenth century. The fact that this is not always easily recognisable is due to the reticent narrative style preferred around and after 1650. This tendency makes the interpretation of single-figured compositions even more difficult, but

⁴ Only after his return from London in 1666, Van Hoogstraeten began to paint genre scenes in De Hooch-like interiors, using mathematical perspective.

⁵ An extensive discussion of the relations between Fabritius, De Hooch, Maes, Vermeer and Van Hoogstraeten in: L. De Vries, *Verhalen uit kamer, keuken en kroeg. Het Hollandse genre van de 17^{de} eeuw als vertellende schilderkunst*, Amsterdam 2005, pp. 114-139, pp. 158-161.

⁶ This is how the dictionary of Merriam-Webster defines satire.

here again the answer is to be found in the iconographic traditions.⁷ One might surmise a gradual loss of these traditions in a kind of *iconographic erosion*, as I once proposed.⁸ This would make it easier to accept that genre scenes from the later seventeenth century are so hard to decipher. Maybe it is better to suppose, not that these traditions were forgotten, but that over the years they were taken less and less seriously. Therefore, the uncertainty of the authors of the Delft and Hague catalogues is understandable, but this does not make some of their conclusions less surprising. *In many of De Hooch's paintings a moralising message or a symbolic content is absent*, the Delft team bluntly states where I least expected it, in cat.nr 21: *The woman weighing gold*.

Above, I contrasted Rembrandt's early style with Jacob Backer's manner, stating that classicism was essential for Maes' early figural compositions. About the style of his genre paintings and those of De Hooch both catalogues remain silent. I am inclined to see the linearity, clarity, and equilibrium in De Hooch's interiors and, to a lesser extent, in those of Maes as clear signs of a tendency toward classicism, but a further discussion of this issue would be out of place here.

The discussion of the relation between two genre artists who both used mathematical perspective in their interiors unfortunately leaves little room for what was the best and most surprising part of the Mauritshuis exhibition: the portraits. Maes stopped making genre scenes when he felt that competition became too strong. He became successful in portraiture in which he gradually moved away from traditional examples to the international style of Anthony van Dyck's followers such as Adriaen Hanneman. When the patrons flocked to his studio, he began to work more and more rapidly. Maybe the Mauritshuis team should have stated with more emphasis that virtuosity is not just a sign of technical dexterity, but also of a creative mind (p. 129-130). In between the lines I read some hesitation. Art from the last decades of the seventeenth century, in an international style moreover, was that not supposed to be a symptom of the decline that hit the 'real Dutch' art when its prime had passed? To falsify these tenacious prejudices, it is enough to leave through the exhibition's catalogue or, for the lucky ones, to remember what the museum had on show. Above I said that the catalogue of the the Maes exhibition is a critical survey of results that already were available. Regrettably, it also summarises current opinions without proposing new ideas.

The Delft catalogue offers a dazzling amount of new information on the artist's biography, his artistic development, his painting technique, the way in which he used topographic elements, and the development of his fame with art collectors. The technical investigations result in a better understanding of the painter's way of working and thinking, the traces of which are visible with the naked eye, once one has learned to see them. Hopefully, these new insights will soon trickle down to the world of museum guides and docents. In this respect, the *Prinsenhof* exhibition gave an excellent example.

Groningen, Lyckle de Vries

⁷ L. de Vries, 'Tronies and other single-figured Netherlandish paintings', *Leids Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, 10 (1990), pp. 185-202.

⁸ L. de Vries, *Jan Steen 'de kluchtschilder'*, Groningen 1977 (privately printed), pp. 75-90.