

Theory and Method in the Study of Architecture and Art
Exhibition Review

“Class Distinctions: Dutch Painting in the Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer.”
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. October 11, 2015–January 18, 2016.

For an exhibition that touts a new approach to understanding seventeenth-century Dutch painting, the Museum of Fine Art’s “Class Distinctions: Dutch Painting in the Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer” underwhelmed. The exhibition, which opened on October 11, 2015 and is on display until January 18, 2016, explores how masterpieces from the Dutch Golden Era reflect differences among the socioeconomic classes of the Dutch Republic. If these canonical works have never before been presented in this way, it’s perhaps because this theme says more about seventeenth-century Dutch society than it does about its art. The show’s central claim was that in this period, Dutch painters depicted people from a wide range of social classes; questions of why they did this, and the significance of doing it, remain largely unanswered. The theme of class might have presented an opportunity to explore topics such as the art market, and how different social groups engaged with art, but instead the exhibition treated these paintings as passive documents of social history.

“Class Distinctions” occupies the basement-level Ann and Graham Gund Gallery. This space is divided into four rooms into which the exhibition’s seventy-five paintings are slotted based on subject matter: in the first room are paintings that picture the upper classes, in the second room hang those that depict the middle classes, and in the third room are paintings of the lower classes. The fourth room, called “Where the Classes Meet”, contains paintings of bustling public spaces, such as Amsterdam’s city square, port, and a view of a church interior. The exhibition also distinguished among specific

subgroups within these broader classes. The room of the sociopolitical elites thus displays paintings of “Stadholders and the Court,” “Nobles and Aspiring Nobles,” and “Regents and Wealthy Merchants.” In the middle class room, we can view “Professions and Trades” and “Women at Work”, and in the lower class room are images of “Laborers” and the “Indigent”. On one hand, this thematic arrangement helped to sketch out some of the basic characteristics of each social register, and also afforded opportunities for a more nuanced rendering of this society.

While convenient and didactic, this organizational structure, on the other hand, had the effect of flattening and fixing a diverse and mutable social hierarchy. Indeed, the flourishing of trade and commerce during Dutch Golden Era meant that social classes were in fact more fluid than ever before, and many of the paintings demonstrate this state of affairs by defying the static categories into which they have been arranged. Albert Cuyp’s ca. 1652-53 *Equestrian portrait of Cornelis (1639-1680) and Michiel Pompe van Meerdervoort (1638-1653) with Their Tutor and Coachman (“Starting for the Hunt”)*, for instance, depicts sons from a family who rose the ranks from merchants to landed gentry, and is in fact one of the earliest non-courtly paintings of a patron on horseback. Other paintings, such as Frans Hals’ ca. 1625 imposing, full-length portrait of the merchant Willem van Heythuysen, similarly exhibit this variable social hierarchy.

Additionally, the fact that much of the painting commissioned and produced across early modern Europe was intended to exhibit visual signs of social class makes the organizational theme of “Class Distinctions” all the less compelling. Though Dutch painters depicted the working classes and urban poor to a greater degree than did many artists in other parts of Europe, this does not mean it was not done elsewhere. Italian

painters Bartolomeo Passerotti (1529–1592) and Antonio Carracci (1583–1618), for instance, painted butchers in their shops. In England, too, visually differentiating the social classes was a concern of many artists and patrons. One compelling example of this effort is Wenceslaus Hollar’s *Ornatus muliebris Anglicanus* (1640), a small, almost taxonomic book of costume prints depicting “the Severall Habits of English Women, from the Nobilitie to the contry Woman.” Many other examples of art from Italy, England, and elsewhere on the Continent could be invoked here, but the essential point is that the use visual means to self-fashion was pervasive in early modern Europe, and this makes the focus of this exhibition—and its assertions of novelty—all the less exceptional.

Almost all of the paintings were accompanied by an extended label, but in many cases these offered no further insight than did the canvases themselves. The labels of single and group portraits in the upper class room identified depicted figures, and described their professions and roles in society. Only a few went beyond this to comment on the significance and function of a painting itself. The label of Rembrandt’s 1639 portrait of the burgomaster Andries de Graeff, for example, points out that its full-length, life-size format “emphasizes de Graeff’s aristocratic pretensions.” The same label also furnishes information about the artist, citing de Graeff’s casual stance and his glove on the ground as evidence of Rembrandt’s maverick approach, and that this may have been an affront to some viewers. Unfortunately, this sort of insight is rare. Moreover, the quality of the explanations deteriorates toward the end of the exhibition, where many labels of paintings depicting the working classes and indigent call out the obvious and become redundant. We are told, for example, that Jan van Bijlert’s *Portraits of the Men*

from the St. Job Inn in Utrecht Collecting Alms (1630-35) depicts “Ten men from Utrecht’s St. John Inn, a hospital/old men’s home, [who] stand behind a balustrade.” Similarly, the label for Isack van Ostade’s *Travelers outside an Inn* reads, “A smartly dressed woman sits atop a wagon. . . a local man feeds and waters the horses.” The much more informative label of Adriaen Brouwer’s *Interior of an Inn* c. 1630 is an exception: “Brouwer’s lowlife genre scenes,” it tells us, “contain subtle intellectual clues and were popular among educated buyers, who would have recognized his quotations from earlier moralizing prints and who could avidly discuss his allusions to themes like sloth and gluttony.”

While Dutch painters are known for picturing the social and natural world around them, this exhibition treated the paintings as passive, neutral documentations, at the expense of considering both the artists’ and patrons’ creative agency. “Class Distinctions” could have been improved by providing more information on the roles and functions of painting for the various constituents of this society. We must remember that these images were as constructed as any, and that artists and patrons designed and desired certain images for certain reasons. I would have liked to know more about the circumstances of creating paintings in this milieu. What forces shaped their designs? How did paintings function for their patrons and purchasers? A text panel at the entrance to the exhibition states that Dutch artists catered to an “open market”, and that paintings were “purchased by all segments of society,” but is this really the case? The exhibition’s silence on the patronage and ownership of works in the last two rooms seems to indicate otherwise: indeed, in most cases, purchasing art was an elite and upper-middle class

privilege. I left the exhibition with a fair bit of insight on early modern Dutch society, but I wish I had learned more about its art.

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