

PTPOST

TIEN UIT DE KUNST

<p>LIJII</p>	<p>GABRIEL FARBATTIUS HET PATRIJSTUIG MAURITSHUIS DEN HAAG 1638</p>  <p>80c</p>	<p>REMBRANDT ZELFPORTRET MET HET KOPPEL KENWOOD LONDE 1669</p>  <p>80c</p>
<p>LIJII</p>	<p>JUDITH LEISTERS ZELFPORTRET NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART WASHINGTON 1632</p>  <p>80c</p>	<p>HENDRICK TER BRUGGHEN TIEBASTIAAN ALLEN MEMORIAL OBERLIN, OHIO 1627</p>  <p>80c</p>
<p>LIJII</p>	<p>JAN STEEN IN WEELEN KUNSTHISTORISCHES MUSEUM WIEN 1672</p>  <p>80c</p>	<p>GABRIEL METSU HET ZIEKE KIND RIJSMUSEUM AMSTERDAM 1672</p>  <p>80c</p>
<p>LIJII</p>	<p>ADRIAEN COORTE IN WEELEN KUNSTHISTORISCHES MUSEUM WIEN 1672</p>  <p>80c</p>	<p>JACOB VAN RUISDAEL GEZICHT OP HANAU KUNSTHISTORISCHES MUSEUM ZÜRICH 1650</p>  <p>80c</p>
<p>LIJII</p>	<p>PIETER SAENREDAM MARKTALATS LITTELIJCHT BOIJMANS VAN BEUNINGEN ROTTERDAM 1638</p>  <p>80c</p>	<p>REMBRANDT DANAL HEERMAN ST PETERSBURG 1668</p>  <p>80c</p>

ZEVENTIENDE EEUW

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## A Shifting Image with an Air of Permanence

• PETER HECHT •

Fig. 1

Set of ten stamps, Dutch Postal Services, 1999, showing l.t.r.: Carel Fabritius, *The Goldfinch* (Mauritshuis, The Hague); Rembrandt, *Self-Portrait* (Kenwood, The Iveagh Bequest, London); Judith Leyster, *Self-Portrait* (National Gallery of Art, Washington); Hendrick ter Brugghen, *St Sebastian* (The Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin, Ohio); Jan Steen, *In Luxury Beware* (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna); Gabriel Metsu, *The Sick Child* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam); Adriaen Coorte, *Gooseberries* (The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio); Jacob van Ruisdael, *Landscape with a View of Haarlem* (Kunsthaus, Zurich); Pieter Saenredam, *Mariaplaats, Utrecht* (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam); Rembrandt, *Danae* (Hermitage, St Petersburg).

Most visitors to that glorious exhibition of Dutch 17th-century art which the Rijksmuseum organized for its birthday, would, I think, have happily agreed that this was indeed a flawless anthology of the very best this period in Holland has to offer. And as it goes, we are likely to feel that our choice is the final one, and that we, now, have sorted out what really matters, and what is there to stay. But have we? And how come we should be right and previous generations wrong?

When the Royal Academy in London staged the most extensive exhibition of Dutch art ever, in 1929, an artist like Berchem was only represented as a draughtsman, and the other great Italianates – Asselijn, Jan Both, Du Jardin and Pynacker – were missing altogether. So were most still-life painters: there was no Floris van Dijck, Pieter Claesz or Willem Heda, so beautifully presented in *The Glory of the Golden Age* [44, 45 and 46], there was no Bosschaert or Van der Ast, and there was neither Van Aelst nor Rachel Ruysch. Dutch 17th-century still-life in 1929 was Kalff and Van Beyeren only. And of course one would have looked in vain for Gerard de Laresse and Adriaen van der Werff. A problem of space this was decidedly not, with nearly 1,000 objects

on display, and nor were most of these neglected artists little known or difficult to obtain at the time – certainly not in London. So it was prevalent taste, and the best in Dutch art must have then looked quite different from the best in Dutch art now.<sup>1</sup>

In 1999, when the Dutch postal services published a sheet of ten stamps to celebrate the glory of 17th-century Dutch painting (fig. 1), I am sure the pictures reproduced were selected because of their supposed canonical significance and popularity in general. But Fabritius's *Goldfinch* [135] was still a work of little or no consequence when it was given to Théophile Thoré in 1859, although he came to love it greatly.<sup>2</sup> And a century later, when Ter Brugghen's *St Sebastian* [7] (fig. 15) was picked up by the Allen Memorial Art Museum in Oberlin, that artist's day, too, had yet to come – not to speak of Adriaen Coorte, who was a virtual nobody until a few decades ago. When Laurens Bol, whose favourite Coorte was one of the stars in the Rijksmuseum's exhibition [131] (fig. 2), handed in the first scholarly paper ever on that artist in 1949, the *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* initially refused to publish it, because one of the editors thought one should not pay so much attention to the work of "an amateur-artist." It



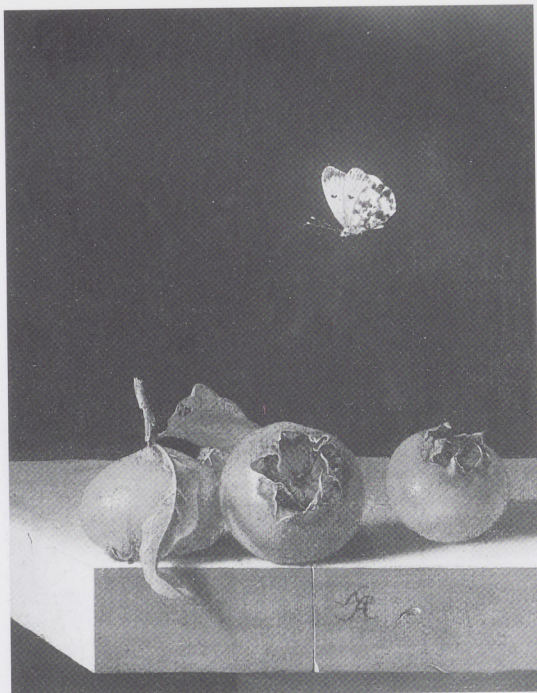


Fig. 2  
ADRIAEN COORTE,  
*Three Medlars*, circa  
1700, Private Collec-  
tion.

took another three years of persuasion for the editors to do their work. In 1960, the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague (which admittedly has a bad record in that respect) sold its very nice Coorte as a picture nobody was going to miss; shortly after, Museum Boijmans acquired one, and in 1995 the Mauritshuis was delighted to accept one in memory of Edward Speelman. Whatever Coorte's appeal today, one had better be careful in calling the beauty of his work timeless.<sup>3</sup>

Fig. 3  
PAULUS POTTER,  
*The Bull*, 1647, Maurits-  
huis, The Hague.



Had the Dutch postal services published a similar set of stamps in 1950, I am sure Paulus Potter would still have been amongst the winners (fig. 3), and Hobbema, too, would no doubt have been an obligatory presence. They were painters I recall having had to memorize in primary school in the early sixties – together with Rembrandt, Hals and Vermeer, Ruisdael and Steen.<sup>4</sup>

So things change and have changed in the perception of what really matters in Dutch art, and an outsider, especially if confronted with the financial consequences of such movements in the history of taste, may well think these ups and downs are just another aspect of what is silly about the rich. In 1924, Frederik Schmidt-Degener, the then director of the Rijksmuseum, not only did not show any interest in buying Ter Brugghen's *Calling of St Matthew* for his own institution (fig. 4), but he also had reservations about the price of that outstanding picture when the Centraal Museum in Utrecht decided to acquire it. According to Schmidt-Degener, 3000 guilders for this – or any other – Ter Brugghen was over the top. Those in the know will appreciate that a Ter Brugghen of such quality would nowadays easily fetch ten million – if it could be had at all.<sup>5</sup> How is one to understand this, and how do such things come about? Who selects what anyway? And when? And why?

The selection of the great masters of 17th-century Dutch painting, began, I am sure, as it always must, by and amongst contemporaries, the artists themselves presumably being the first to point out what they thought was best. That Rembrandt as well as Rubens were aware of the qualities of Adriaen Brouwer (fig. 5) and collected his work, is a nice case in point – especially as it would be hard to think of an artist further removed from what they themselves did and stood for.<sup>6</sup> And their admiration for this indeed





extraordinary artist can only have impressed the art lovers who came to see them in their studios, where I presume one talked about the merits of earlier and contemporary art much as one would nowadays. These discussions, of which for evident reasons only a few faint echoes have come down to us, must have been essential, for they will have made art lovers aware of what the artists were after, and have helped train the eye of the dealers and patrons who then spread the news. Thanks to that extraordinary fragment in Huygens's recollections recording his early contact with Rembrandt and Lievens in 1626, we can still imagine how such a visit to the studio by an enthusiastic amateur might have stimulated (and at times annoyed) an artist much as it would nowadays, and if we read what Adriaen van der Werff tells us about his early visits and discussions with collectors such as Brouwer and Paats, we can see quite clearly how and where the initial dialogue about what was good and bad in art

took place – and why it would have mattered to both parties involved.<sup>7</sup>

It was also, I am sure, this initial consensus amongst the happy few that brought the informed traveller to the studio of painters like Rembrandt and Dou, Van Mieris and Vermeer. Such successful masters received the grand at home, and already sold (or could have sold) their work to an international audience during their lifetime, although most 17th-century Dutch art seems to have been admired and collected only locally at first.<sup>8</sup> And there was a lot of it, too. To come to terms with that impressive production and provide information on what was most worthwhile once the qualities of the art of the Golden Age had been recognized by the market at large, written guidance was eventually called for. Given the great flourishing of Dutch art around 1650-1660, it is interesting to see that the first attempt at such a more than local survey dates from 1662. Its author, a notary from the Flemish city of Lier, was not quite

Fig. 4  
HENDRICK TER  
BRUGGHEN, *The  
Calling of St Matthew*,  
1621, Centraal  
Museum, Utrecht.



Fig. 5  
ADRIAEN BROUWER,  
*Strong Medicine*, circa  
1635, Städelsches  
Kunstinstitut, Frank-  
furt.



up to the difficult task he had set himself however, and De Bie's *Gulden kabinet* is in many ways more sympathetic than useful. The German-born painter Von Sandrart, who spent some considerable time in the Netherlands himself and knew his way about all over Europe, already did much better with the lives of Dutch artists he included in his 1675 *Teutsche Academie*, but the real job was only undertaken by Arnold Houbraken. His *Groote schouburg*, published between 1718 and 1721, was meant to provide the reader with an authoritative series of lives of Netherlandish artists, which would begin where Karel van Mander's 1604 *Schilderboeck* left off, and therefore deal precisely with what we would now call the masters of the Golden Age. As yet, Houbraken's antiquarian (and therefore rather generously inclusive) attitude did not contribute much towards the shaping of a canon of Dutch art however; the discussion of the excellent only was evidently not what he strove for, and putting on record as much as he could find, was not always as helpful as it seems.

A cynic might even say that what he accidentally excluded from his book was to be at least as influential to the history of taste as what he managed to discuss – one of his involuntary omissions having caused the virtually complete neglect of Vermeer during some 150 years, and another the long oblivion of Hobbema.<sup>9</sup>

Be that as it may, Houbraken's *Groote schouburg* was nevertheless an immediate success with the art-loving public, as Jacob Campo Weyerman's best-selling rehash of it proves, and it was the Houbraken material that provided Dézallier d'Argenville with the possibility of including a more selective set of biographies of Dutch painters in his *Abrégé de la vie des plus fameux peintres* of 1745. This book, more than any other, seems to have been the first to try and establish what amounted to a published canon of the greatest masters in Dutch art, since the connoisseur D'Argenville left out everything he thought was not worth collecting. Writing in French (and soon being translated into English and German), D'Argenville also had a truly European audience, which Houbraken evidently had not. And good for us, D'Argenville not only tells us quite specifically about the then quite recent fancy for Dutch pictures in France, but also informs us in the second, 1762 edition of his book, that this interest had increased even further after the publication of his *Abrégé* in 1745, which now had been extended to include some masters he personally did not much like – such as Jan Steen and Jan van Goyen.<sup>10</sup>

D'Argenville's taste in general was quite catholic, although he preferred the highly finished and the elegant above the painterly and the vulgar. Also, like most collectors of his day, he had little or no use for portraits, and therefore Hals, too, is not an artist that he fancies. In Holland this seems to have been different, and some foreign collectors, like the markgrave of





Fig. 6  
REMBRANDT, *The Nightwatch*, 1642, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Hessen-Kassel, were early to accept Hals as worthy of their collections as well.<sup>11</sup> Much of what the Rijksmuseum's exhibition showed however, be it Potter, Berchem or Ruisdael, Rembrandt, Van der Werff or De Lairese, would have fully met with D'Argenville's approval – and it is useful to note that the selection of Dutch masters shown in *The Glory of the Golden Age* was much closer to eighteenth-century taste than the 1929 selection in the Royal Academy in London was.

And this of course has a reason, too, for D'Argenville's pre-revolutionary taste, which also informed the

core collections of St Petersburg and Dresden and The Hague, to name only the very greatest, was revised dramatically when a certain type of Dutch 17th-century painting became the one acceptable historical role-model for an art that wanted to break with the classical tradition as it had been established in France and was being taught all over the western hemisphere. It was the dark and common side of Dutch art that was now considered relevant and enlightening, and it was the originality of the Dutch in painting their own world in a preferably personal style that now became an exemplary alternative to the long-standing emulation of the ideal beauty of Raphael and the ancients. The cheek of painting a lifesize *Bull* (fig. 3) and what was considered to be a *Nightwatch* [65] (fig. 6), rather than the in many ways more common *Gods, Saints and Heroes*, as Blankert's influential show of Dutch 17th-century history painting was so aptly called, appealed enormously to the demands of Courbet's generation (fig. 7). Country-side rather than Arcadia, one's own contemporaries rather than the characters from biblical and ancient fiction, and ultimately even herring and onions rather than gold and velvet – that was the 1848 agenda, and the hero who wrote the programme for it, was, of course, Thore.<sup>12</sup>

It would be hard to find another critic who so enormously influenced that so-called permanent image of Dutch art that many of us still grew up with – an image that had to serve the demands of realism, of individualism, and ultimately of Dutch nationalism as well. Almost every problem of inclusion and exclusion in the surveys of Dutch painting as they appeared in the twentieth century, and almost every revisionist discussion of what was considered worth presenting in permanent collections or exhibitions, can be explained with Thore's *Musées de la Hollande* in hand. Dutch art was

Fig. 7  
GUSTAVE COURBET, *The Firebrigade in Ornans*, 1850-1851, Petit Palais, Paris.





considered great, provided it was art that had contributed to the cause of 19th-century realism and its political agenda. This meant its subject matter had to be or at least look as though it was contemporary, local, and preferably lower class – democratic and republican, in short. Along the same lines, its style would have to be individual rather than impersonally descriptive or idealistically classicising. Decorative outlandish landscape fantasies were no longer welcome, painting with an invisible brushstroke was considered a false trick rather than a great achievement, a classicistic orientation was experienced as treacherous to the realist ideal, and an institutionally religious one as a sign of bigotry or worse. So out went the Italianates, out went the *fijschilders*, and damned twice over were men like Gerard de Lairese and Adriaen van der Werff.

Rembrandt alone could get away with painting biblical history and mythology, because his interpretation of the New Testament was so strikingly human that his Christ looked like one of us. The rare instances in which Rembrandt painted mythology

were excused as well, because he was thought to have made the antique fairy tales look ridiculous (fig. 8) – as though he were a precursor of Daumier rather than an artist who tried to tell his story truthfully. The absolute *bête noire* in Dutch art was now – for evident reasons – Adriaen van der Werff, doing his classically inspired Catholic pictures for a German prince, having himself become a man of title – and I am certain Thoré and his friends would have loathed the Rijksmuseum's recent acquisition of Van der Werff's *Adam and Eve* (fig. 9), bought in 1995, much as he would have detested Willem van Mieris's *Rareeshow* – acquired only in 1999.<sup>13</sup>

And it is not just Thoré who would have been upset that his crusade had been in vain. So would Frederik Schmidt-Degener, the director of the Rijksmuseum who more or less reinvented the place in the 1920s and gave it the character – and the standard of excellence – it has since retained. The museum he found upon his appointment in 1921 was a rather uninspiring place, its policy having been a more or less documentary one, albeit without much system or rigor to it. There were important paintings, like the Rembrandts which the city of Amsterdam had given on loan, and popular ones, like Dou's *Evening School*, the acquisition of which the first king of Holland, Louis Bonaparte, had made possible, but there was also quite a lot of dross, and in one of his less kind moments, Schmidt-Degener qualified the little policy the Rijksmuseum had developed until then as the ambition to own a picture by every Dutchman who had ever held a brush. What he aspired to was something totally different, and because he wanted to turn the Rijksmuseum into a great art museum rather than maintain it as an antiquarian institution, he decided the Dutch school should there be represented as one of the great European schools of painting. This, he thought, could only

Fig. 8  
REMBRANDT,  
*Ganymede*, 1635,  
Gemäldegalerie,  
Staatliche Kunst-  
sammlungen,  
Dresden.







Fig. 9  
ADRIAEN VAN DER  
WERFF, *Adam and  
Eve*, 1717, Rijks-  
museum, Amsterdam.

be achieved by broadening the collection's scope to include paintings other than Dutch, so that there would be some real perspective, and by showing nothing but the very best. The museum's interest should therefore, Schmidt-Degener thought, from now on be directed only towards the presentation and acquisition of works of art, Dutch and otherwise, that truly mattered and always would. The bloodshed that was necessary to rid himself of everything else, that is, of what he did not approve of or thought to be out of place – the relics of national history, the work of minor masters, modern and contemporary art, even young visitors and much of his inherited staff – is quite a story on its own. What matters here, however, is

Schmidt-Degener's idea of the best in Dutch art, his idea of the permanent image, or *Het blijvend beeld der Hollandse kunst*, as he called it in a 1935 lecture that was later to be the opening and eponymous essay in one of the two volumes of his collected papers as they were published after his death.<sup>14</sup>

Reading these articles and lectures is hard work, by the way, for Schmidt-Degener wrote in an extremely mannered style, while his ideas were almost always second-hand. And although he himself is likely to have thought of Fromentin as his example, it is, I think, Thoré whom he ultimately follows,<sup>15</sup> or perhaps one had better say Bode, for it was Wilhelm Bode who had best visualized Thoré's concept of the Dutch masters in the collection of the then Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin. Now Bode was a scholar, like Thoré had also been, and he seriously added to and refined some of Thoré's particular insights in Dutch art, although he did not have that critical gift which would have allowed him to personally stimulate and influence what was going on in the art of his own time. In that respect, Bode was very much a second generation man, an academic who already stood quite firmly in a certain tradition whose partisan origins were none of his concern. He was also, I think, the sort of man who would have admired Thoré for his work on Vermeer rather than for his commitment to French contemporary art – an art to which Bode's response always remained lukewarm at best, notwithstanding his close connection to Max Liebermann and the great Berlin dealers, who did so much to introduce French modernism in Germany. Bode loved the Dutch art in Thoré's selection, but he does not seem to have shared the Frenchman's wish to help change the direction of contemporary art, let alone to do so because society itself was in need of a change.<sup>16</sup>





Fig. 10  
DIRCK VAN BABUREN,  
*Prometheus*, 1623,  
Rijksmuseum,  
Amsterdam.

Schmidt-Degener was yet another matter. As far as I can see, he was neither a critic of great merit nor a scholar worth remembering, and when he allows himself a personal effusion of emotion about the pictures he loves, there is not much that will still come across today. He adored Fabritius's *Goldfinch* [135], and one realizes he tries to bring his reader closer to that picture, but rather than perhaps speculate about the fettered state of the little bird and the inherent sadness of his not being able to fly away, as many a literary man would do, he points out the finch is likely to have died in the same explosion that killed the artist who painted it. Segers' artistic obsession with mountainous landscapes makes Schmidt-Degener speculate about the coincidence of that artist falling to his death down the stairs at his home, De Witte's suicide strikes him as a better response to the crisis in Dutch art than Hobbema's going into business, and when talking about

Rembrandt, Schmidt-Degener's prose ends in such a blaze of purple that one can nowadays only smile at it. No matter the banality of his thoughts however, Schmidt-Degener was a great organizer, who understood very well what the Rijksmuseum needed, and who indeed managed to reinvent the collection and its presentation to such an extent that his successors only began to retouch his *permanent image* in the early 1970s.<sup>17</sup>

And for one who had grown up on Thoré and Bode, so to speak, it should not surprise us that Rembrandt was Schmidt-Degener's Beethoven, the man in whom 'Holland and humanity became one', and that he would have happily secured Metsu's *Sick child* [119], Verspronck's *Blue Girl* [113], and a series of extraordinary landscapes for the Rijksmuseum, like the Segers' *River landscape* from the collection of Cornelis Hofstede de Groot and the Van der Neer from the Six Collection [86]. All of this was of course for the best, and if one thinks of what Schmidt-Degener did by adding Rembrandt's *Prophetess Anna*, the *Jeremiah* [55], his *Denial of St Peter*, the *Titus in a monk's habit*, and the *Self-Portrait as St Paul* to the Rijksmuseum's collection, one realizes what an outstanding director he was.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, being a dedicated follower of the 19th-century French reading of Dutch 17th-century art, there was also very much Schmidt-Degener did not do – no matter how easy (and cheap) – it would have been at the time. Dutch art that smacked of foreign influence or had outlandish subject matter had forsaken its right to a place in the Rijksmuseum Schmidt-Degener, as it was sometimes critically called. The two splendid *Philosophers* by Ter Brugghen, which had entered the museum as a gift in 1916, were given on loan to Utrecht, Baburen's *Prometheus* (fig. 10), somewhat more cruelly, had almost been dispatched to the Dutch East Indies together with



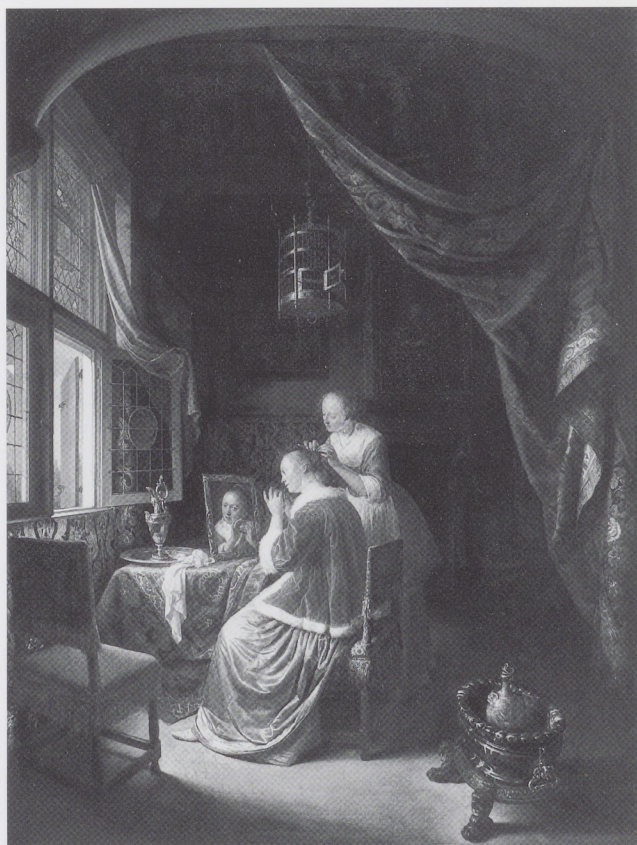
a series of Italianate landscape paintings, because Batavia, now Djakarta, was supposed to be given a museum of its own. I could not trace when Ter Brugghen's *Philosophers* came back to Amsterdam, but Baburen's *Prometheus* was only taken from storage and put on display in 1972 by Pieter van Thiel – some twenty years after the groundbreaking Utrecht and Antwerp exhibition on *Caravaggio en de Nederlanden*. The Italianates had no place in the pantheon of Dutch art before Blankert's 1965 exhibition either, and even Cuyp, who was quite a star in Great Britain and the United States, was always a bit too seigneurial for Schmidt-Degener's taste. The possible acquisition of the great *View of Dordrecht*, now in Washington, was not considered when the picture was shown by Duveen in Amsterdam, and the Rijksmuseum only bought its large Cuyp *River landscape with riders* in 1965 [151].<sup>19</sup> Schmidt-Degener did not give a thought to the possible acquisition of a group of Dutch *fijnschilders* either, when Munich did its great sell-off in the 1930s – getting rid of a whole series of excellent but unloved Dou's, Van Mierises and Van der Werffs for precisely the same reason that made Schmidt-Degener refrain from buying them. The Museum Boijmans in Rotterdam fared better at the time, and at least acquired Dou's *Quack* and his *Young Woman at her toilet* (fig. 11); unfortunately Frans van Mieris's *Doctor's visit*, now in the Getty, was not recognized as something one might also want to have. A Dutch private collector bought it from Munich, but when it came up for auction in 1975 and again in 1986, it seems the Rijksmuseum was still too much under the spell of previous taste to have seriously considered its acquisition. Again an exhibition had to break the ground.<sup>20</sup> The same applied to history painting, which was long under a complete taboo with the one exception of Rembrandt and the Rembrandtesque; the Dutch were simply

not supposed to paint such subject matter. Jan de Braij's extraordinary *Banquet of Cleopatra*, so prominently shown in the recent exhibition on Dutch Classicism in Rotterdam and Frankfurt, was not picked up by the Rijksmuseum when it was offered for sale in the 1960s by the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg – the picture probably wasn't even noticed.<sup>21</sup> The Rijksmuseum's best work by De Lairese, his *Selene and Endymion*, was on loan to Utrecht University from 1923 to 1971; its Van der Werff *Adam and Eve*, as mentioned above, was only acquired in 1995.

Interestingly, many of these programmatic 19th-century gaps in the Rijksmuseum have been filled from the 1970s onwards, and *The Glory of the Golden Age* presents us with this revised taste for a more comprehen-

Fig. 11

GERARD DOU, *Young Woman at her toilet*, 1667, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam.





sive image of Dutch 17th-century art, showing how the spell of Thoré's judgement has finally been broken. And indeed, the cause of realism has been won with such conviction, that the 1848 agenda has become mainstream and more. It is the other 19th century which is clamoring to be heard by now, not young Manet and Degas. It was Italian Baroque art that needed to be reassessed by the time the Dutch had so convincingly established themselves as a model for the young, and while Schmidt-Degener was happy to note that the Carracci and Dolci and Batoni had been chased off stage in all the great collections, here too a revisionist attitude has in the meantime taken over.<sup>22</sup> The price to be paid for all this, I think, may well be that the relevance of the Dutch old masters has decreased a bit, simply because they are no longer needed to legitimize anything new.

Even the post-Thoré excitement about Dutch 17th-century still life is over. Having learnt our lessons from abstract art, an art that dismissed subject matter and all the pleasures previously derived from the illusionistic imitation of the natural world, it has become something of a received truth that a painting must achieve its aim through colour and line and composition first of all – and amongst the traditional genres, still life was the best (or perhaps one had rather say: least unlikely) case with which to prove this. This battle for the supremacy of pictorial values having been fought and won however, we are now not only free to enjoy the modernistic merits of still-life painting, but also to admire its illusionistic aspects. Van Aelst's sumptuous arrangements with their exquisitely rendered textures have once again become at least as popular as the more sober earlier still lifes which so appealed to 20th-century modernist taste. This too, French 18th-century collectors would have certainly understood and approved of,

for they were impressed with Kalf and shrugged their shoulders at Claesz (figs. 12, 13).<sup>23</sup>

If I may make a little proposition to end on, I would like to say that those who shape and guard the canon, like it or not, can only see past art with the eyes of their own time, and that the old masters have retained their right to live only because they have time and again been found capable of taking on significance not previously recognized or seen. This is, I full well realize, a bit of a 'curse in church', as we call it, for the Rijksmuseum's exhibition was meant to celebrate the permanent image of Dutch art and the brave work of the art historians who have worked for so long to establish it. But can there be such a thing as a permanent image of the past? And shouldn't we be a bit more modest if we realize that in all likelihood only half of the ten postage stamps which were published in 1999 (fig. 1) would have been considered important works of art in 1850? Fabritius's *Goldfinch* [135] was a modest newcomer then; the late Rembrandt a bit of a problem; Judith Leyster a nobody, and her example Hals something only the radicals as yet believed in. Steen, Metsu and Ruisdael would have been alright, but Saenredam, Ter Brugghen and Coorte were virtually or even totally unknown. And isn't it the sensibility of Mondriaan and Dibbets that has brought Saenredam so much closer to contemporary taste, and do not the aesthetics of 20th-century photography and Morandi inform at least part of our response to Coorte? And has Jan Steen, especially in a picture like the Viennese *In Luxury Beware* [116], not become infinitely more difficult to like and understand than Coorte with his *Gooseberries*, while the Ruisdael from Zurich [153] does not encounter such a problem at all? And should we, art historians, address this sort of question about quality and relevance, or simply ignore it and pretend we are

Fig. 12  
WILLEM KALF,  
*Still Life with Chinese  
Vase*, Musée de  
Picardie, Amiens.

Fig. 13  
PIETER CLAESZ,  
*Still Life*, 1629,  
Private Collection.





doing history, like everybody else?<sup>24</sup>

I suggest we don't, at least not when looking at the paintings that were in *The Glory of the Golden Age*. This exhibition was not a comprehensive, antiquarian survey, but a proposal to accept and recognize this specific selection as the enduring – and therefore now relevant – legacy of Dutch art. And much of it stood up extremely well, and proved what a great and sensitive choice can do. Only very rarely did history rather than art seem to tip the balance: Wtewael's *St Sebastian* [6] is a striking illustration of a specific fashion around 1600, but the best it could do in the *Glory* was highlight Ter Brugghen's *St Sebastian* [7] as a great and moving work of art, which Wtewael's is very clearly not (figs. 14, 15).<sup>25</sup> Eglog van der Neer [180] (fig. 16),





Fig. 14  
JOACHIM WTEWAEL,  
*St Sebastian*, 1600,  
The Nelson Atkins  
Museum of Art,  
Kansas City.



too, is a most interesting art-historical case – the case of a transitional artist who can help us understand what bridged the gap between Ter Borch and Van der Werff, but whose work can otherwise, I fear, communicate little but vacuity nowadays. The young Rembrandt's *Rape of Europa* [53] is a no for me as well: an interesting picture, yes, and well-preserved, but part of *The Glory of the Golden Age*, no way – had this been what Rembrandt was about, I doubt we would still speak of him outside of academia. But look at his so-called *Titus* from Rotterdam [145], and enjoy Fabritius's *Goldfinch* [135] and Saenredam's *Church at Assendelft* [75]. Think of the Metropolitan's Van Goyen [83] and the Ruisdaels from Madrid and Zurich [82, 153]; look at Porcellis and De Vlieger [84, 85], recall Queen Elizabeth's Berchem [93], and do remember Van der Heyden as well [175]. And treasure Coorte's *Medlars* [131].

Perhaps this will be the permanent image of Dutch art after all, and perhaps the choice of our time is the best so far, because we have rid ourselves of the pressures of realism and nationalism and the romantic need for expression of the self. Objectivity, however, we will never achieve – at least not as long as the old masters matter and somebody *cares* about what they have to say.

Fig. 15  
HENDRICK TER  
BRUGGHEN,  
*St Sebastian*, 1625,  
The Allen Memorial  
Art Museum, Oberlin,  
Ohio.





Fig. 16  
EGLON VAN DER  
NEER, *Elegant Couple  
in an Interior*, 1678,  
Private Collection.



## NOTES

- 1 For the exhibition of Dutch art that was held at the Royal Academy of Art in London from 4 January to 9 March 1929, see especially the *Commemorative Catalogue of the Exhibition of Dutch Art 1450-1900*, Oxford 1930.
- 2 Fabritius's *Goldfinch* is first mentioned by Thoré in his 1859 catalogue of the Arenberg Collection as *un morceau de rien, mais excellent*, see C. Brown, *Carel Fabritius*, Oxford 1981, p. 126. It was later given to Thoré by its then owner, Mr Camberlyn of Brussels, and became one of the critic's treasured favorites; see *ibid.*, pp. 82 and 88, note 23, and the introductory note by P. Mantz in *Catalogue de Tableaux Anciens (...) le tout formant la Collection de feu Thoré-Bürger*, Paris (Drouot) 5 December 1892, p. 8. In 1896 the *Goldfinch* was acquired for the Mauritshuis collection.
- 3 For the initial refusal of the *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* to publish Bol's study on Coorte, see L.J. Bol, *Adriaen Coorte*, Assen 1977, p. 29; for a brief history of Coorte's work in Dutch public art collections, see P. Hecht, 'Een Coorte voor Middelburg', *Kunstschrift* 35 (1991) nr. 5, pp. 7-9; for the Speelman gift to the Mauritshuis, B. Broos, 'Adriaen Coorte: *Stilleven met aardbeien* (1705)', *Mauritshuis in focus* 8 (1995) nr.1, pp. 13-14.
- 4 That Vermeer was not honored with a stamp in 1999 was probably due to the fact that a separate set of three postage stamps had been dedicated to the artist in 1996, on the occasion of the Vermeer exhibition in Washington and The Hague. Hals was presumably left out in 1999 to make the politically correct way for Judith Leyster, the best known woman painter of the Golden Age.
- 5 For Schmidt-Degener's reservations about the price of Ter Brugghen's *Calling of St Matthew*, see G. Luijten, "'De veelheid en de eelheid': een Rijksmuseum Schmidt-Degener", *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 35 (1984), p. 389; for the artist's increasing fame and acceptance in Dutch museum collections, see P. Hecht and G. Luijten, 'Nederland verzamelt oude meesters', *Kunstschrift* 30 (1986) nr. 6, p. 194.
- 6 For Rubens's seventeen paintings by Brouwer, see J. M. Muller, *Rubens: the artist as collector*, Princeton 1989, pp. 139-142, cat.nrs. 272-288; for the seven paintings and an album of drawings by Brouwer in Rembrandt's possession, see Rembrandt's 1656 inventory as published in exhib.cat. *Rembrandts schatkamer*, Amsterdam (Rembrandthuis)/Zwolle 1999, pp. 147-52, nrs. 1, 2, 4, 5, 49, 55, 82, 215.
- 7 For Huygens's discussions with Rembrandt and Lievens, see C. Huygens, *Mijn jeugd*, ed. C.L. Heesackers, Amsterdam 1994, pp. 84-90; for Van der Werff's visits to the collections of Brouwer and Paats, and their joint excursions to see great works of art in Amsterdam and Antwerp, see Van der Werff's autobiographical notes as published in B. Gaetgens, *Adriaen van der Werff*, Munich 1987, pp. 434-436.
- 8 We know that Cosimo de'Medici bought and ordered some contemporary works of art when touring the Netherlands in the 1660s, and there are other travellers of the period whose journals or inventories also betray an early interest in Dutch 17th-century painting. A truly European market for Dutch art was however to open up only a few decades later – one assumes after the first generation of great Dutch collectors had died and the more enterprising Dutch dealers sought and found an international clientèle for their possessions. A study of one of the key figures in this process, the Hague marchand-amateur Willem Lormier (1682-1758) is currently being undertaken by Everhart Korthals Altes (Utrecht University).
- 9 The most important study on Houbraken is still C. Hofstede de Groot, *Arnold Houbraken und seine 'Groote Schouburgh' kritisch beleuchtet*, The Hague 1893; for his (partly involuntary) role in shaping the canon of Dutch art, see especially B. Cornelis, 'Arnold Houbraken's *Groote schouburgh* and the canon of 17th-century Dutch painting', *Simiolus* 26 (1998), pp. 144-161.
- 10 For Weyerman's successful plagiarization of Houbraken and the significance of Dézallier d'Argenville's *Abrégé*, see Cornelis, *op.cit.* (note 9), pp. 153-161.
- 11 For Hals's reputation, see F. S. Jowell, 'The rediscovery of Frans Hals', in exhib. cat. *Frans Hals*, Washington (National Gallery of Art)/London (Royal Academy of Arts)/Haarlem (Frans Halsmuseum) 1989-1990, pp. 61-86; for the early interest in Hals in Kassel, where Margrave Wilhelm VIII (1682-1760) bought no less than five of his pictures between 1749 and 1755, see B. Schnackenburg, *Staatliche Museen Kassel: Gesamtkatalog Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister*, Mainz 1996, pp. 138-140.
- 12 For a summary of Thoré's points of view, see P. Hecht, 'Rembrandt and Raphael back to back: the contribution of Thoré', *Simiolus* 26 (1998), pp. 162-178.
- 13 For the 'modern,' that is 1848, reading of Rembrandt's histories, especially his *Danae* and *Ganymede*, see P. Hecht, *Over Rembrandt, Manet, en het tweede leven van de kunst*, Utrecht 1997; for Thoré's profound dislike of Adriaen van der Werff and Willem van Mieris, see for example W. Bürger [= T. Thoré], *Musées de la Hollande*, 2 vols., Paris 1858-1860, vol. 2, pp. 106-107.
- 14 Schmidt-Degener's work for the Rijksmuseum is discussed extensively in Luijten, *op. cit.* (note 5), pp. 351-429; for Schmidt-Degener's collected essays, see F. Schmidt-Degener, *Phoenix*, Amsterdam 1942, and *idem*, *Het blijvend beeld der Hollandse kunst*, Amsterdam 1949.



- 15 Like Fromentin, Schmidt-Degener also had serious ambitions as a creative writer and published a considerable amount of poetry that was received rather well at the time. Both writers indulged in the tragic lives of the great masters they admired, in Rembrandt's first of all, and somewhat surprisingly, neither of them seems to have fully appreciated the quiet art of Vermeer. For a brilliant assessment of Fromentin's criticism, see Meyer Schapiro's 1949 essay, reprinted in M. Schapiro, *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society*, New York 1994, pp. 103-134; for his (by then old-fashioned) lack of interest in Thoré's hero Vermeer, see H. van de Waal's introduction to his translation of *Les Maîtres d'Autrefois, De meesters van weleer*, Rotterdam 1951, pp. XXXII-III; for the same in Schmidt-Degener, see Luijten, *op.cit.* (note 5), pp. 363-364.
- 16 Bode himself confessed he knew Thoré's *Musées de la Hollande* almost by heart, see W. Bode, *Mein Leben*, 2 vols., Berlin 1930, p. 26. It is unlikely he was as interested in Thoré's criticism of contemporary art, however, and his attitude towards Hugo von Tschudi, who did his best to present the great French modernists from Barbizon onwards in Berlin and paid for it with his dismissal, was hardly encouraging. For Bode's mixed feelings about Von Tschudi's preferences and the problems they caused, see *ibidem*, vol. 2, pp. 123-124 and pp. 200-204 respectively; for some of the more nasty bits surrounding Von Tschudi's dismissal and Bode's role in the conflict, see M. Ohlsen, *Wilhelm von Bode*, Berlin 1995, pp. 236-238.
- 17 For Schmidt-Degener's sentiments about Fabritius, Segers, De Witte and Hobbema, see F. Schmidt-Degener, *Het blijvend beeld*, *op.cit.* (note 14), pp. 17, 11, and 39 respectively; for a characteristic passage on Rembrandt, *ibidem*, pp. 40-43.
- 18 It was a (late) Rembrandt self-portrait that inspired Schmidt-Degener to say that this image does not represent Holland, but 'Holland and humanity merging', see Schmidt-Degener, *Het blijvend beeld*, *op.cit.* (note 14), p. 24. For a complete list of Schmidt-Degener's acquisitions for the Rijksmuseum, see Luijten, *op.cit.* (note 5), pp. 417-425.
- 19 For the near expulsion of the Baburen and the Italianate landscapes from the Rijksmuseum see Luijten, *op.cit.* (note 5), p. 412, note 228; for Schmidt-Degener's lack of interest in Cuyp's *View of Dordrecht*, *ibidem*, pp. 338-339.
- 20 For some extraordinary examples of the Munich *fijnschilder* deaccessions in the 1930s, see P. Hecht, exhib.cat. *De Hollandse fijnschilders*, Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum)/The Hague 1989, p. 141, note 3. After leaving Munich, Frans van Mieris's *Doctor's visit* was in several important Dutch collections, those of Ten Cate and Van den Bergh among them, before being sold abroad in the mid-sixties. It was then twice auctioned by Sotheby's, in London, 19 March 1975 (£ 15,500), and again in Monte Carlo, 21 June 1986, where it was bought for the J. Paul Getty Museum at well over £ 330,000. The Rijksmuseum's interest in the *fijnschilders* only dates from after the exhibition it hosted; it has since acquired the works by Willem van Mieris and Adriaen van der Werff mentioned above, as well as Eglog van der Neer's *Circe punishing Glaucus*.
- 21 For De Braij's *Banquet of Cleopatra*, see A. Blankert *et al.*, exhib.cat. *Hollands Classicisme*, Rotterdam (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen)/Frankfurt (Städelsches Kunstinstitut) 1999, pp. 296-299, nr. 58; the price of the well-nigh unsalable picture was £ 2,100 when it was auctioned by Christie's in London on 1 July 1966. After three more years on the market, it was picked up by the Currier Gallery of Art in Manchester, N.H.
- 22 For Schmidt-Degener's relief that these Italian artists no longer featured in the great collections of his day, see Luijten, *op.cit.* (note 5), p. 397, note 64. Current taste will have this otherwise, and from the 1950s onwards a veritable policy of restoration has here taken place, albeit without much of a response from the public at large.
- 23 There is an interesting aspect of historical revenge in the way still-life painting, once a little esteemed specialty, became the one traditional genre to flourish in the highdays of early 20th-century modernism, precisely because of the possibilities it offered to an aesthetic that condemned narrative in the visual arts and subscribed to the belief that less was more.
- 24 Interestingly, this relative idea of the canon, which cannot be seen but through the eyes of one's own time, is at the heart of the conflict between Bode and Von Tschudi. Bode was shocked to discover that 'Tschudi was only interested in the old masters from a contemporary perspective, and [thought] that (...) this alone could legitimize their position in our own time' (*dass Tschudi die alte Kunst doch nur noch vom Gesichtspunkt der modernsten Kunst interessierte und dass er sie (...) nur in dieser Beziehung für uns als berechtigt anerkannte*), see Bode, *op.cit.* (note 16), vol. 2, pp. 203-204.
- 25 The comparison between these two pictures had recently been suggested by the huge exhibition of painting in 17th-century Utrecht, where Honthorst's *St Sebastian* from the National Gallery in London was also on display, this master offering yet another, completely different approach to the subject. See exhib.cat. *Masters of Light*, San Francisco (Fine Arts Museums)/Baltimore (Walters Art Gallery)/London (National Gallery) 1997, nrs. 2, 9, 10, and my review of that exhibition in *The Burlington Magazine* 140 (1998), pp. 705-07.