

A Day with Vermeer: The Dutch Masters at the Royal Collection

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Dutch masters. With such words, a particular town comes to mind: Delft. Delft, with its Johannes Vermeer-Pieter de Hooch associations. Not intellectually rigorous, we are told (as if all painting has to trigger your cerebral apparatus). Domestic, even tedious to the unworked, lazy eye. This is the view when various reviewers take up their pen (or keyboard) to get busy on the Delft masters. Peter Campbell, in writing for the London Review of Books in July 2001, was covering the Vermeer and the Deft School exhibition at London's National Gallery.

He writes of Carel Fabritius in terms only slightly less flattering than Vermeer or Hooch. "Of the three masters Fabritius is the least Delft-like. His subject-matter is not domestic, predictable or repetitious - and that of most of the Delft painters, even the very good ones, is one or all of those things." [1] He makes the claim that Hooch and Vermeer were "intellectually much less ambitious."

This is not to say that Campbell avoids distinctions. Hooch has "provincial infelicities" in his drawing; Vermeer lacks them. The former prefer the "low lifes"; the latter, "religious and historical subjects." Then there is Delft itself - quiet, not much going on relative to bustling Amsterdam.

Campbell may not mean much by that. He obviously finds such depictions tedious, though they betray a remarkable ignorance of one fundamental point: depictions of space and technique. The domestic setting is the footnote to a broader articulation of spatial awareness. The human subjects do matter - stunningly so - but only in so far as they afford a relational glance to the dimensions of their environment: the room in question, penetrated by the light of an engaging sun.

The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace currently affords the visitor a treat of 27 masterpieces in its *Masters of the Everyday: Dutch Artists in the Age of Vermeer*. It is a sampling of colour and geometrical dance, pictures of the tranquil ordinary, the tavern life, rustic living. Vermeer is a painter that makes one quizzical at first. This is the prelude to captivity. He is the classic expression of the phenomenon of the less that provides more. His name vanished from the art world for two centuries, only to be pushed back into limelight recognition by art critic Théophile Thoré-Bürger in 1866. Thoré-Bürger's enthusiasm got the better of him: 66 pictures were said to be by the rediscovered Dutch master. A mere 35 have been conclusively attributed.

If you do nothing else in an exhibition, weary as you are, see a Vermeer. It all comes down to the genius of rendering luminosity and textural effect. Art critic Robert Hughes captured that essence with characteristic accuracy. The painter, he argued, build "up forms with

continuous movements of the brush” using “tiny luminous highlights, pasty dots and spots bringing more dissolved areas of light into focus. These gave a startling effect of studied, textural distinctness.”

Vermeer’s *A Lady at the Virginals with a Gentleman*, ‘*The Music Lesson*’ (1662-5) draws in the space, allowing the subjects to be engaged in their sovereign state of privacy.[2] It supplies the viewer with church like solemnity (in contrast, some Dutch painting sees church interiors as rather busy affairs, with animals and children), with casting light and razor sharp perspective. Vermeer demonstrates through the blurred image on the mirror on the wall that he is very much present without being intrusive – part of the legs of an easel are exposed. The spectator, in a sense, has been exiled from the view, allowing the man and woman to pursue their association. Hooch similarly stresses the private domestic space. The gaze is eliminated – we cease to be participants with the characters under observation, becoming, in turn the invisible. Masterful use of space on canvass is evident in *Cardplayers in a Sunlit Room* (1658). The participants, a woman and three men, are in the corner, literally, of a moment. They are absorbed, one drinking a glass of wine; another smoking; yet another gazing at the smoker, face upturned but shaded. The lady is the one with the cards. The Royal collection of Dutch art also reeks of moral warnings, though this by no means suggests that all naughtiness is prohibited by threat of hellfire damnation. This is the human challenge: to be Epicurean in balance, modestly disposed, or a debauchee of life without a compass. Lechery, debauchery and violence tend to come with the human lot; but there is room for fun amidst the warnings of excess. There are the oysters and the wine – seduction, as depicted in *A Gentleman pressing a Lady to Drink* (1658-9) by Gerard ter Borch, a theme similarly emulated in even more lewd fashion in Willen van Mieris’ *The Neglected Lute* (1710).[3]

Drink-fuelled, entertaining, ceremonial folly can itself be a duty, to be laughed at precisely because it has, at its core, a serious reflection. Custom demands it. Jan Steen gives visitors a sense of such action in *A Twelfth Knight’s Feast: ‘The King Drinks’* (1661).[4] At such celebrations, a person draws lots, and a Lord of Misrule accordingly selected. A monarch for a day, as it were – with the selected person in this scene suitably sozzled and readying for more. Other figures also occupy this rich space of life. To the left, a dog licks a pan with relish; to its right, a boy sports a golf club.

Such painting did not merely confine itself to home spaces. Jan Steen’s *A Village Revel* (1673) is a crowded, busy tribute to Pieter Brueghel the Elder.[5] The sun is setting, and the Dutch cast of characters appear in the fashion of “rude mechanicals” amidst mayhem, brawling, broken pottery, and an inn marked with “this house is for hire”. At the centre, a Spanish soldier, that figure of past occupation which the Dutch fought to be rid off, a figure to be reviled; a boat filled with monks to mock; a woman on a broom. A man sports a lantern in the fashion of Diogenes suggests the vain quest for an honest man.[6] Comic peasant types, faces drawn almost as brilliant caricatures, heavily personalised with rough expressions.

The Netherlands of money and fashion seems distant in the Delft school. This is genre painting in its purest sense, absorbed in enclosed spaces of living. It is also the Netherlands of domesticity and provincial restraint, only quietly influenced by capitalism and urban development. The roar of commerce gives way to sun lit communities of quiet card players, carousing drinkers, prospective lovers and peasants.

The exhibition “Dutch Masters at the Royal Collection” lasts till February 14, 2016.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v23/n13/peter-campbell/at-the-national-gallery>

[2]

<https://www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/405346/a-lady-at-the-virginals-with-a-gentleman-the-music-lesson>

[3] <https://www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/404805/a-gentleman-pressing-a-lady-to-drink>

[4] <https://www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/407489/a-twelfth-night-feast-the-king-drinks>

[5] <https://www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/405611/a-village-revel>

[6] http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_romana/greece/hetairai/diogenes.html

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