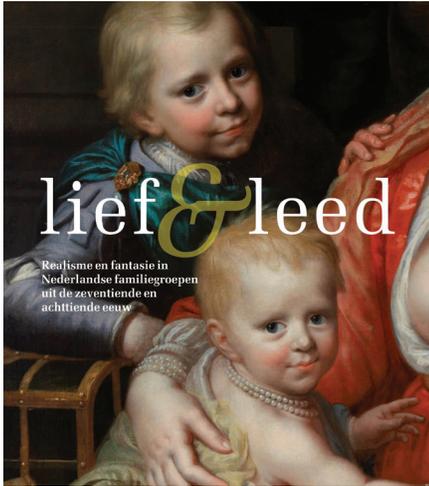


Note

Rudi Ekkart and Claire van den Donk, *Lief en Leed. Realisme en fantasie in Nederlandse familiegroepen uit de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw*, Zwolle, 2018. ISBN 9789462621930.



Lief en Leed (Love and Sorrow) is dedicated to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century family portraits and the stories behind these paintings. The book is yet another broad publication on portraits written by Rudi Ekkart, a renowned portrait expert. Ekkart has collaborated with Claire van den Donk on numerous projects and this is their second joint book publication. Published on the occasion of the eponymous exhibition held in the Rijksmuseum Twenthe in Enschede, Ekkart and van den Donk's new book seeks to provide a systematic overview of family group portraits with an unusual composition as well as visible and invisible irregularities, in order to further investigate realism and fantasy within the genre. In doing so, the

books successfully challenges readers to look beyond a composition, making them realise that things are not always as they seem.

The book's insightful introduction is followed by two general chapters that provide an overview of the history of family portraits from the sixteenth century onwards. The third chapter introduces the central theme of the book: the tension between realism and fantasy in family portraits. Ekkart and Van den Donk discuss the realism of different aspects of a portrait, including costume, composition, and physiognomy. Their central argument is that portraits are much less realistic than has often been assumed. While the rendition of the sitters' faces might be realistic, both the surroundings and the pictured attributes often have a symbolic function. Fashion, status, and hierarchy are often more important than a realistic portrayal.

The exhibited family portraits are discussed in detail in the following four chapters, each of which treats a different category: recognisable death, disguised death, family expansion, and family contraction. Every chapter starts with an in-depth introduction of the category,

followed by a series of entries of particular paintings. Besides archival details, identifications, and provenance, these entries explore the paintings' thematic affinity to the category. Most of them tell intriguing histories of the family portrayed, focusing on the love and sorrow of the book's title: celebratory events such as marriage and birth, but also death, illness, and other tragic reversals in family life. The book ends with a conclusion and an English summary for non-Dutch readers.

In some entries the authors seem somewhat too eager to find the explanation for an irregularity within sitters' family history, as they neglect to examine the contextual elements and focus only on telling life stories. Yet those life stories are not enough to determine whether we are dealing with realism or fantasy. There is much more to the commissioning of a portrait than only family history: it is necessary to determine what the sitters were looking for in the commission of their family portrait. This is particularly true in chapter seven, where most of the paintings discussed seem to have been altered in later centuries, for example during restorations. The authors speculate about family fights or other sorrows, while there is simply not enough information available to support a possible story, meaning that no assumptions on realism or fantasies can be made.

In their meticulous research, Ekkart and Van den Donk focus on the question of whether a painting depicts a truthful image of a family at the moment of manufacturing. The book is an opulent source of numerous family histories and the amount of archival research is impressive. The authors conclude with the statement that compositions were determined by a desire to show harmony and pride – values that were often deemed more important to communicate than the true character of their sorrow. Their research has shown that sitters chose to consciously incorporate family members and family history into their portraits. They also see a clear relationship between composition and historical facts; many portraits show family love, even if death came along. However, none of the assumptions made in chapter three are re-examined in the conclusion. Based on their findings, the authors could have reconsidered contextual elements on both portrait realism and fantasy, and could have connected the issue of realism to the conscious choice to incorporate life elements such as love and sorrow in the composition. This actually shows that family history itself should be considered as an element of portrait realism, rather than an element of fantasy.

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