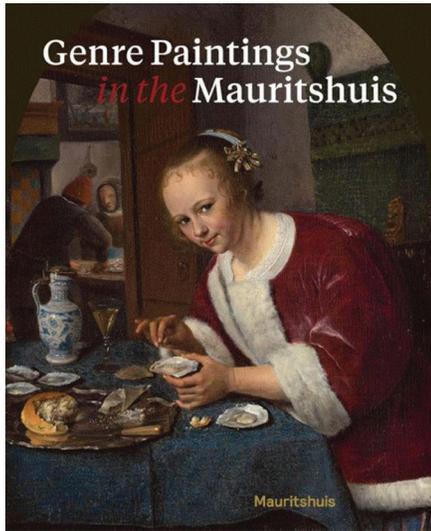


Review

Ariane van Suchtelen, Quentin Buvelot et al. *Genre Paintings in the Mauritshuis*, The Hague, Mauritshuis, Zwolle, Waanders, 2016, 412 pp. ISBN 978-94-6262-094-0.



Many years ago the Mauritshuis embarked on a project to produce catalogues of their entire collection of paintings, starting in 1993 with the museum's history paintings, followed in 2004 by the portraits. Now the museum has published a new tome, this time devoted to the genre paintings. The continued production of printed catalogues is both wise and courageous. Too often we are led to believe that in this digital age printed publications are redundant. Online collection catalogues provide the audience with free and unlimited access to the collection, but the trump card of the printed equivalent is durability. Museums can cease to exist, which is admittedly unlikely to happen to the Mauritshuis. Or they can suffer cuts that make it impossible to properly main-

tain their website. A book is a clearly visible milestone, whereas silent updates in online research are bound to go unnoticed. Printed catalogues will remain indispensable and the Mauritshuis has proven once more that they are by no means out of date. The series started long ago under the previous director, but the format has stayed the same: one or more introductory essays followed by a catalogue with elaborate entries for the top works and a summary catalogue at the back with shorter notes on the others with smaller reproductions.

The first essay by Edwin Buijsen is a general introduction and deals with a wide range of topics, from historiography and methodology to stylistic developments, pictorial traditions, subject matter, the market for genre paintings and the history of the collection. As a dramatically disparate category genre painting is hugely problematic to demarcate. The term, as Buijsen explains, means 'type' or 'kind' and is meaningless, and the main reason for classifying a painting under genre seems to be that it does not belong to any of the other, proper genres (history painting, portrait, landscape or still life). Buijsen defines genre paintings as scenes featuring anonymous figures involved in 'everyday actions'. The

term 'everyday' is another label often used for lack of a more accurate one, and misleading. It is paramount to nuance if and how these scenes relate to actual daily life, an issue Buijsen does bring up but only at the end of his text. What he to my idea does not emphasize enough and does not satisfactorily explain is that even if a seventeenth-century painting may seem to depict a 'simple' scene of daily life, the artist will nearly always have relied on prints, drawings or paintings by predecessors and other colleagues rather than having taken his cue directly from something he experienced in his daily life. A concise characterization of Dutch and Flemish seventeenth-century genre painting should make plain just how extremely interconnected these scenes are and how deeply entrenched through older pictorial and literary sources in the moralistic medieval culture. Much of that is still very present in the art of Adriaen Brouwer and Jan Steen, but even the *à la mode* toilet scenes by Gerard ter Borch, Gabriel Metsu and Jacob Ochtervelt can be linked to earlier allegories of vanity. Yes: styles changed, techniques developed and new motifs, figure types and types of settings emerged. Moreover, the accent had shifted from preaching with a smile to displaying artistry and virtuosity. Yet in essence the subject matter largely remained the same – lust, vanity, the foolishness of people, love, motherhood and so on, which is crucial to consider when attempting to 'read' these scenes as they were intended and would have been understood in the period, a complex matter Buijsen also discusses but cursorily and only at the end of his essay.

Buijsen devotes considerable attention to another complex but intriguing issue; a division of Dutch seventeenth-century genre painting into a low and high life category, denoting the social status of the protagonists in these scenes and their setting. To represent genre paintings as belonging to either of two antidotes is a rhetorical device invented by some later seventeenth-century art critics with an agenda to advocate aesthetically and morally uplifting scenes. This seventeenth-century debate indeed seems, as Buijsen points out, to comment on and welcome the gradually increasing refinement and elegance that had been taking place in Dutch genre painting from the 1640s onwards and would reach its zenith in the 1670s. Still, the surviving genre paintings display a fluid gamut from one extreme with scenes with beggars in rags to scenes featuring aristocratic protagonists in palatial décors, even if more sharply defined groups can be identified within this body with specialists whose work exemplify the outer poles.

A group of authors wrote the second essay, chiefly the museum's conservators. It presents results of the systematic technical research on the paintings, explains with which materials and techniques seventeenth-century artists worked and how they created their paintings step by step. The division into high and low genre also fascinated the authors of this essay and they set themselves the task to investigate 'whether it would be possible to draw a parallel between technique and the subject matter that distinguishes 'high' and 'low' genre paintings.' The goal, one presumes, is to single out meaningful patterns. In that case a premise is called for, especially since there is considerable evidence suggesting there is no simple correlation between technique and subject matter: genre paintings associated with so-called high life are executed in techniques that range from extremely labour intensive to very rapid or simple and the same applies to what is designated as so-called low life genre. Furthermore, one wonders how technique, which is real and can often be described rather precisely, can be analyzed in relation to 'high' and 'low' genre, which are artificial

and elusive categories, referring to just one aspect of the iconography. Artists exploited their tricks of the trade to create certain effects and each of these in turn could be more or less appropriate to a particular social atmosphere in a scene. The focus should therefore maybe not be so much on high or low, but rather on the narrower context of the effects aimed at. Whatever the case, the essay is an extremely useful introduction to the wealth of technical observations and their sometimes far-reaching implications that are presented throughout the book.

Then follow 53 entries discussing 64 works that are considered the highlights of the collection. It must have been an absolute joy to do research on them because the Mauritshuis's collection of genre paintings is one of the finest in the world. All these texts are comprehensive and, some, exhaustive. The entries on Ter Borch by Quentin Buvelot, for instance, bear witness to his great admiration and knowledge of the master. Likewise, Ariane van Suchtelen wrote the densely researched entries on Adriaen Brouwer and Jan Steen. For all these authors' expertise, the style of writing is tailored to a wider audience, which deserves a compliment.

The entries contain many new insights and sharp observations on numerous fronts, and are richly illustrated with comparative images. At times the authors struggled to mould the plethora of topics into lucidly structured, pithy prose. A reader first and foremost longs to know what exactly is depicted and why is it depicted the way it is. The, sometimes lengthy, descriptions of what is represented in the painting do not always enlighten him as efficiently as possible.

The collection of genre paintings in the Mauritshuis is so superb that a selection had to be made of lesser works to be relegated to the summary section. The latter, for that matter, still contains many a first-rate work. Fortunately, the entries in this section are also quite thorough, so these paintings have been given their due as well. An indispensable part of the book is the scholarly apparatus, consisting of provenance, exhibition and conservation history, selected bibliography and technical notes. Other useful appendices are a glossary of technical terms and photographed samples of signatures and dates. The book is excellently searchable thanks to an index of names.

Dutch genre painting has been quite thoroughly researched, more thoroughly than for instance portraits, still lifes, landscape or marine painting. In recent years some new avenues of investigation were explored. With so many approaches available, the Mauritshuis catalogue project was a splendid test case. The authors have struck a beautiful synthesis of established scholarship and recently developed insights. In addition to the increased emphasis on technical research, for instance the dress historical perspective was also put to good use. The Mauritshuis' genre catalogue is a formidable achievement that demonstrates that the study of Dutch and Flemish genre painting has come of age, even if there is still so much left to be explored and to be debated. The director's foreword does not inform us when the next catalogue, which will deal with the still lifes, is planned. It is to be hoped that we do not have to wait another twelve years for it to appear.

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