

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press (English language) 1997

First published 1997

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stoichita, Victor Ieronim.

[Instauration du tableau. English]

The self-aware image : an insight into early modern meta-
painting

/Victor I. Stoichita ; translated by Anne-Marie Glasheen
p. cm. -- (Cambridge studies in new art history and
criticism)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-43393-2

1. Painters—Psychology -- 2. Painting, Renaissance—
Themes, motives. 3. Painting, Modern—themes, motives.
4. Metacognition.

I. Title. II. Series.

ND1288.S7613 1997
750'.18—dc21

96-46977
CIP

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0-521-43393-2 hardback

CHAPTER THREE

Margins

The frame separates the image from anything that is nonimage. It defines what is framed as a meaningful world as opposed to the outside-the-frame, which is simply the world experienced. We should, however, ask ourselves: To which of the two worlds does the frame belong?

The reply is inconclusive: to both and to neither. The frame is not quite image and it is no longer a simple object belonging to the surrounding area. It belongs to existence, yet its existence cannot be justified except in relation to the image. However, whilst it makes the image possible, it is not part of its ideal world.¹ The "separation" is nevertheless essential to the whole process of splitting the image. In painting, the intertextualization is manifested above all, through how the frame of the interconnecting painting relates to that of the embedded painting. The embedded image has a painted frame (a frame that is a painting); the embedded image has a frame that is also, this time, an object from the real world.

It is extremely significant that in the seventeenth century (a period obsessed with the "aesthetic boundary" and the period that marks the birth of intertextuality²), the real frame was regarded as the primary problem underlying all definitions of the image. Before reaching the intertextual junction, seventeenth-century *épistémé* was concentrated on the definition of the "ontological cut" effected by the frame of all paintings. It was regarded as the site of a symbolic process.

At this point, I propose to trace the manner in which painting at that time tackled the analysis of the representation's borders or margins as well as the manner in which framing was approached as a theoretical issue – rarely discussed, but often (I am almost tempted to say "always") brought into play.

Niches

The actual framing that most resembles the painting is – as we have seen – the window.³ But there are other commonly used methods used to

mark a caesura, notably doors and niches. How the latter contributed to the emergence of the still-life has already been discussed in the preceding pages although all its possible implications have not been exhausted.

Like the window (and the door), the niche is a kind of *hiatus* in the flat surface of the wall. But unlike the window (and the door), it does not pierce it: It carves into it.

Even in its prehistory, still-life finds its spatial paradigm through the space of the niche. The illusory stereometry of the object painting has the same ambivalent relationship with the wall.

All painting is a negation of the wall. Still-life must not destroy it (the way a landscape to a certain extent does). It should only revitalize it. There is a structural link between the framing of the niche and that of the object painting. And it is precisely this link that is brought to the fore in the string of examples that present the spectator not simply with an object painting, but also with a matrix that has separated these objects from the surrounding world (Figs. 5, 6, 8, and 13). In all these examples, a dialogue is introduced between the frame of the picture and the frame of the niche – itself become an image. Although this dialogue raises questions from the moment the painting begins to conform to the “modern” (rectangular⁴) format, the niche remains an architectural feature traditionally endowed with a semicircular ending. This is in fact the case with Jacques De Gheyn’s *Vanitas* (Fig. 13), for it is a work of art in which the artist achieves the link between the feigned architecture and the rectangle of the painting.

There is, however, a way of avoiding this contradiction, as the painting of the Spaniard Juan Sánchez Cotán (1560–1627) demonstrates.⁵

However, we should point out that sources on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish art describe still-life as having been cultivated in an avant-garde milieu. The first paintings of this genre emerged in 1590 from the intellectual circles of Toledo and then spread to those of the courts of Valladolid and Madrid.⁶ Sánchez Cotán was originally a religious painter in the purest of the Counter-Reformation’s iconographic traditions. His style changed radically, however, when he began to paint *bodegones*, for the intellectualism of the representation demanded a completely different destination than that of the Church. Nevertheless, it is still difficult to determine what the status of still-life was at that time. Only one document on the subject exists – and this is far from being explicit – that would lead us to conclude that *bodegones* were prized by the most cultured collectors.⁷

However, we should not forget that in 1603, when Sánchez Cotán turned his back to the world to become a Carthusian monk, he still had at least twelve *bodegones*⁸ in his possession. Three of these, listed in the inventory made of his belongings, he left to two artists: Juan de Salazar and Diego de Valdivieso.

Documentation now at our disposal suggests that the *bodegones* were essentially conceived as "artistic experiments." Sánchez Cotán's *bodegones* (Figs. 14 and 15) all depict a small quantity of fruit, vegetables, or game within the embrasure of a rectangular niche. The frame of the niche runs parallel to the layout of the painting, hence the dialogue between the format and outer edges of the actual painting. The parapet and inner wall delineate a rectangular area of limited depth. The objects that make up the still-life consequently appear to be placed in a dilated "stereometrized" frame: They are caught between two surfaces, also rectangular, namely, the dark background of the niche and the invisible surface of the painting into which they sometimes encroach in a distinct *trompe l'oeil* effect. It is important to be aware that the upper edge of the niche is invisible; or to be more precise, that it is not within the painting's field. The niche, therefore, is only bounded on three sides. There is an "outside-the-image" that encompasses the frame, unless, of course, the frame is both *in* the image and outside it.

Like (almost) all early still-life pieces, those of Sánchez Cotán are structured along the lines of a *trompe l'oeil*. We know nothing of how these would originally have been framed nor whether they would even have been endowed with one. We know that framing a *trompe l'oeil* was not compulsory and that in many cases it was even superfluous. But, even without a frame, Cotán's paintings were the product of a "cutting." Although they make up a secondary, "illusionist" frame, the vertical sides of the niche are not symmetrical. This asymmetry is certainly no accident. It is a ludic sign of the artist's, a highly significant reference, produced between the representation and the general cutting of the image. Of further significance is that there is virtually no contact between the objects. They do not touch or overlap.

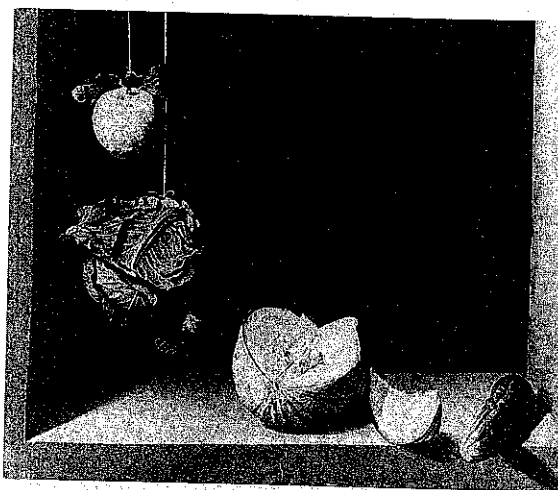
In the *bodegón*, which is today in San Diego⁹ (Fig. 14), the objects are arranged in a downward curve. They are five isolated "bodies" within the area of the niche whose empty space covers three-quarters of the representation: a pure rectangular space, whose impact we could be tempted to describe as *aniconic*. It is the framed rectangular itself that seems to be the main theme of Cotán's *bodegones*. The objects are there by accident. The actual frame is presented in such a way that it emphasizes its pictorial qualities: The eye can appreciate the thick brush strokes of the embrasure, the graininess of the pigment, the effects of light and shade. The effect is reinforced if we examine the last of Cotán's dated still-life pieces (Fig. 15), which – strange though this may seem – comes from the Carthusian Monastery at Granada, where the artist spent the last years of his life. It demonstrates the ultimate limit of his art and is a pictorial meditation on the relationship among the *frame*, the *object*, and the *framed* "void."

We know how Sánchez Cotán worked thanks to documents that have come down to us. In the 1603 inventory, item 9 reads: *un lienzo empri- mado para una ventana* ("a canvas prepared for a window"¹⁰). The extract from the inventory leads us to believe that the artist first painted the frame and added the objects later. The fact that this canvas – which probably depicted the niche without the objects – was listed in the twelve *bodegones* strikes me as fairly significant: It means that it was well and truly considered to be a *painting*.

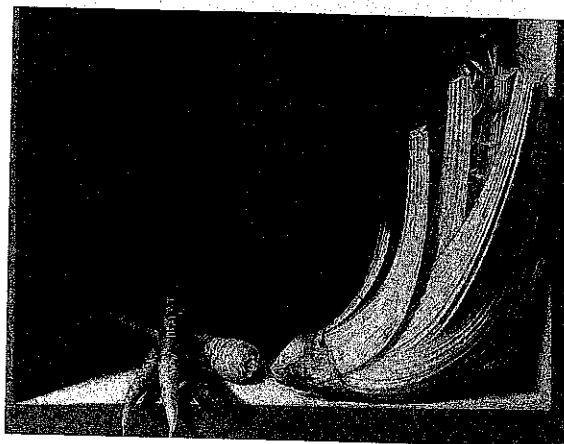
One final revealing feature in this context is the artist's signature.

How and where an artist signs his work is never – especially in the seventeenth century – unpremeditated. The signature is testimony to, in a manner that is always significant, the relationship between the creator and his creation.¹¹ And Sánchez Cotán signs – when he does – in the center of the sill of the niche. This is an indication of the "aesthetic boundary" being taken over, a thematization of the frame as a bearer of the author's name.

MARGINS



14. JUAN SÁNCHEZ COTÁN, *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber*, 1602, oil on canvas, 69 × 84.5 cm, San Diego Museum of Art (California), gift of Anne R. and Amy Putnam. (Photo: San Diego Museum of Art.)



15. JUAN SÁNCHEZ COTÁN, *Artichokes and Carrots*, ca. 1603–4, oil on canvas, 62 × 82 cm, Granada, Museum. (Photo: Junta de Andalucía, Consejería de Cultura, Granada.)

THE SURPRISED
EYE

Windows

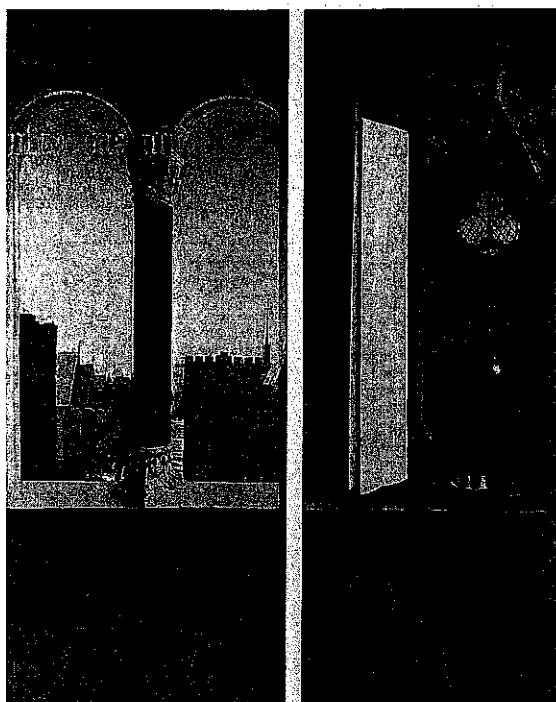
I have already described the way in which two different meanings of the window/painting are merged in Velázquez's work. The Spanish master takes this merging as far as the intertextual threshold, right up to the point where the boundary between window and painting disappears. Other interpretations were added to this motif over the course of the seventeenth century. The success, for example, of the portrait within an embrasure is worthy of a separate study.

The versatility of the "window metaphor"¹² makes any attempt at classification (which is in fact what I am trying to avoid) difficult. I would prefer to answer one question only, an essential one if we are to delve into the origins of the intertextuality undertaken during the period we are studying: What is the role of the window (the painted window, the window become "painting") in the perception new painting has of itself?

The only reply possible is, however, restrictive: Just as the niche is defined as the "ontological cut" of still-life, the window acts as a catalyst in the definition of another pictorial genre: that of the landscape. All the other roles, whether symbolic or formal, the window has known pale into insignificance compared to its relevance when it comes to the self-awareness of the landscape as such. The reason is simple: The window brings about the internal/external dialectic without which the relevance of the landscape, of all landscapes, could not be determined. Still-life like landscape is the product of conflict. But if the former is formed "this side" of the painting, the latter on the other hand is born "beyond" the painting.¹³ For a landscape to be a landscape, one indispensable constituent must exist: *distance*.¹⁴

To paint a landscape out of doors is a recent invention, one set up in fact as a reaction *against* the tradition of painting images of nature in a studio. This whole tradition of the image of nature (or nature become image) assumes the existence of a "cultural" indeed "civilized" space *from which* an *outside* is contemplated. Even in the case of urban landscapes, a separation is indispensable. It is the rectangle of the window that transforms the "outside" into a "landscape." It is for this reason that incunabula of this pictorial genre must be sought in backgrounds of Renaissance paintings where they were first given a definition through conflict and where the window had an essential role to play.

One could at this juncture quote an endless list of works of art taken from Flemish as well as Italian painting. I shall limit myself to citing a Flemish example that, in the context of this study, takes on a paradigmatic value. It is the enormous altarpiece painted by the Van Eyck brothers for St. Bavo in Ghent (completed 1432; Fig. 16). It is the first time that we find a landscape in the motif of the window and objects in a niche, each occupying a whole panel and juxtaposed as in a geometric



MARGINS

16. HUBERT AND
JAN VAN EYCK,
Ghent Altarpiece,
external panels,
1432, oil on wood,
Ghent, St. Bavo.
(Photo: IRPA/KIK,
Brussels.)

diagram. The two external panels must be certainly seen in the context of the altarpiece and more especially in that of the scene of the Annunciation to which they belong. And yet their isolation in the separate panels in a way removes them from the iconographic discourse by giving them, in addition to their symbolic meaning, a pictorial meaning reinforced by the niche/window conflict.

Given the quantity and variety of examples produced in Italy, it would be unnecessary to study the window motif in relation to the birth of landscape painting. An analysis of a few documentary sources might, however, shed some light on the problems being explored here.

The first source is Aretino's famous letter to Titian dated 1544:

Master Titian,

My friend, having broken with custom and dined alone, or rather in the irritating company of the tremors which prevent me from quietly enjoying my food, I left the table filled with the distress I was already experiencing when I sat down to eat. Then, placing my arms on the window frame I rested my chest and virtually the whole of my body against it, and gazed out at the magnificent sight of the many gondolas filled with foreigners and local people which captivated not only my gaze but also that of the Grand Canal, itself so seductive to anyone crossing it. . . .

Finding myself bored from being alone and not knowing what to focus my thoughts on, I raised my eyes to the sky which, since God had created it, had never been so marvellously painted with so many shadows and lights.

The air was exactly as those who are jealous that they are not in your place, would imagine it to be like. As I describe it you will see, first of all the houses

THE SURPRISED.
EYE

17. TITIAN, *The
Doge Francesco
Venier*, 1554-6, oil
on canvas, 113 × 99
cm, Madrid,
Thyssen-Bornemisza
Collection. (Photo:
Thyssen-Bornemisza
Collection.)



which, although built of stone, appear to be made of an unreal substance. Then you will see the air which felt alive and pure in places and, the opposite, heavy and contaminated in others. And now, just look at the magnificent clouds made of layers of humidity! Half of them had gathered in the foreground above the rooftops while the rest were moving away into the background. I was quite dazzled by the diversity of their colours. The nearest were burnished by the flaming rays of the sun while those in the distance were of a somewhat dull red lead paint. How perfect were the features by which nature's brushes composed the sky, distancing it gradually from the houses the way Vecellio does in his landscapes! And here a touch of bluey-green, there a touch of greeny-blue, created on the impulse of that master of masters, nature. And with the help of light and shade, it dissolved or accentuated all that should be dissolved or accentuated, in such a way that I, who knows that your brush is a gift of its gifts, sighed three or four times: ah, Titian, where are you?

Believe me, if you had painted what I have just described to you, you would have aroused in all hearts the wonderment with which I myself had been infected. As I looked at what I have just described to you, my soul was gratified but the miracle did not last any longer than the colours of this unimaginable painting. *May, from Venice 1544*¹⁵



18. JAN VAN EYCK,
*Madonna with
Chancellor Rolin*,
1435, oil on wood,
66 × 62 cm, Paris,
Louvre. (Photo:
RMN, Paris.)

This passage raises a question that is typically Venetian. It is a description of the lagoon looking like a painting. In Venice, in the sixteenth century, nature and painting are almost synonymous terms: Painting is "a second nature," for by imitating it, it outclasses it. Nature, in its turn, imitates painting when it is at its best. So that nature may be perceived as a painting, there must be a "cut." This cut is intentionally brought about, in the letter quoted, by the window frame. Aretino would probably never have been able to picture the Venice sky "like a Titian" (Fig. 17) had he been in the middle of the street or canal. The a priori condition of this vision (and of the resulting *ekphrasis*) is formed by the window frame. It was within its embrasure that Aretino has his vision of Venice looking like a "painting by God," like a superlandscape by Titian, the god of painting.

In this context, Jan Van Eyck's *Madonna with Chancellor Rolin* (1435; Fig. 18) is a key work. The central scene depicts an apparition/vision of the Virgin. Behind is a triple arch through which we see an urban landscape disappearing into the distance. In the middle distance, situated behind the arches, but separated from the landscape by a parapet, are two tiny figures seen from the back. The identity of the two figures

has been the subject of much discussion, but one fact is certain: They imitate the stance of the spectator standing before the painting.¹⁶ The spectator is thus doubly involved in the painting but in two different ways. On the one hand, he is contemplating the main scene from close up and from the front, in a virtual "face-to-face" dialogue with the main characters.¹⁷ On the other hand, he sees in the distance and through the arches the landscape in the background, following the example of his anonymous doubles.

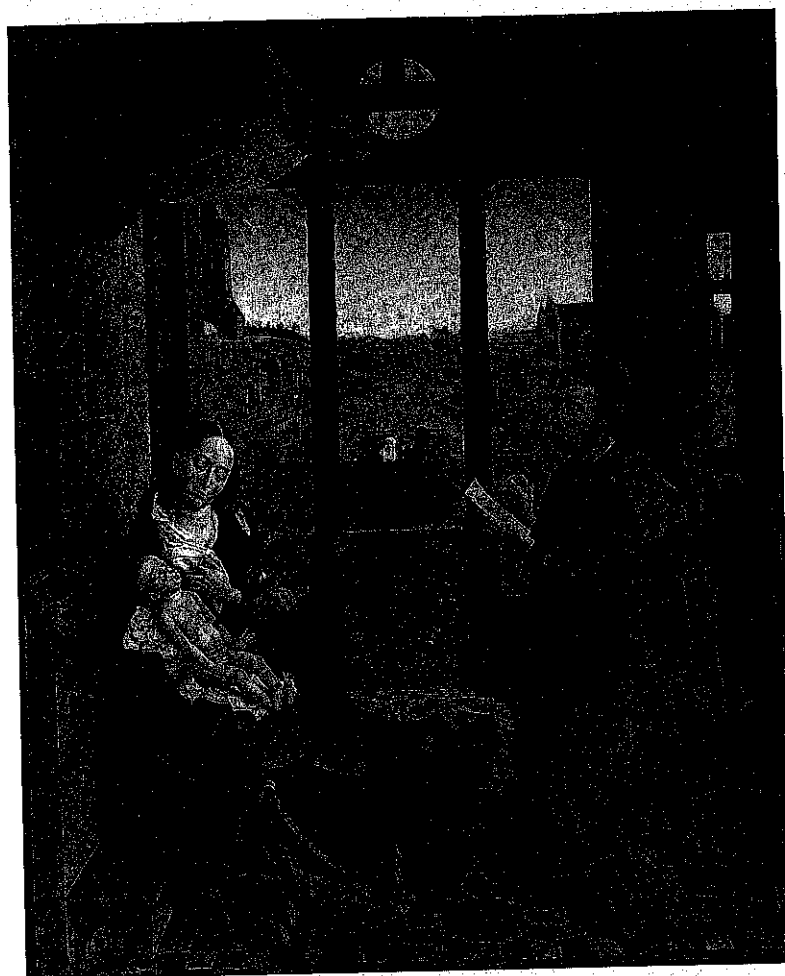
A few years earlier – as we have seen – the Van Eyck brothers had isolated the landscape-seen-through-a-window on one of the huge panels of the Ghent altarpiece (Fig. 16). They brought the embrasure of the window to the foreground, without forgetting the parapet, however, in front of which the spectator had to stand like the small figures in the Rolin Madonna. It could be said that the road leading from the Ghent altarpiece to the Rolin Madonna is, as it were, equivalent to the spectator's *mise en abyme*,¹⁸ one that involves the contemplation of a specific pictorial object: the landscape.

We understand the full significance of the procedure the Van Eycks followed when we consider what came immediately afterwards. The most notable example is Rogier Van der Weyden's *St. Luke Painting a Portrait of the Virgin* (ca. 1440; Fig. 19).

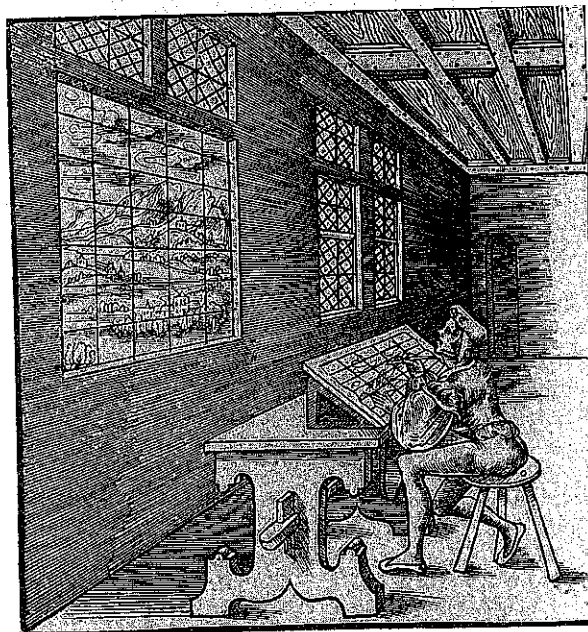
What we have in this painting is a genuine demonstration of artistic creation, even though it takes place, as is to be expected, within the bounds of Christian iconography. The fact that the *mise en scène* of the image of the Madonna as the product of a vision and the contemplation of a landscape as a "seen-through" are thematized in the same painting helps us understand what appeared in the Van Eyck painting in a much more codified language.

We have to wait until the sixteenth century for the theme of gazing out of a window to epitomize – explicitly – the birth of the painted landscape. Aretino's letter quoted earlier contained the elements of a merging of the gazing out of the window with the creation of the landscape. In a way, the spectator-cum-painter figure originated with Aretino himself.

Other examples, this time visual, bear witness to how important this motif was in the sixteenth century. One of them is an illustration that accompanies a treatise on the perspective of Dürer's school¹⁹ (Fig. 20). It combines the Albertian *topos* that painting is like an open window with the method of projection developed by Dürer. It is the grill through which we see the landscape that acts in this instance like a "diaphragm." This woodcut is strictly documentary,²⁰ but it testifies explicitly to the perfect transposition of the "frame other" into the frame of a painting. It is the window that, through the cross-ruling, allows the fragment of nature seen "through" to become a "painted landscape."



19. ROGIER VAN DER WEYDEN, *St. Luke Painting a Portrait of the Virgin*, ca. 1440, oil on wood, 135.3 × 108.8 cm, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts. (Photo: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.)



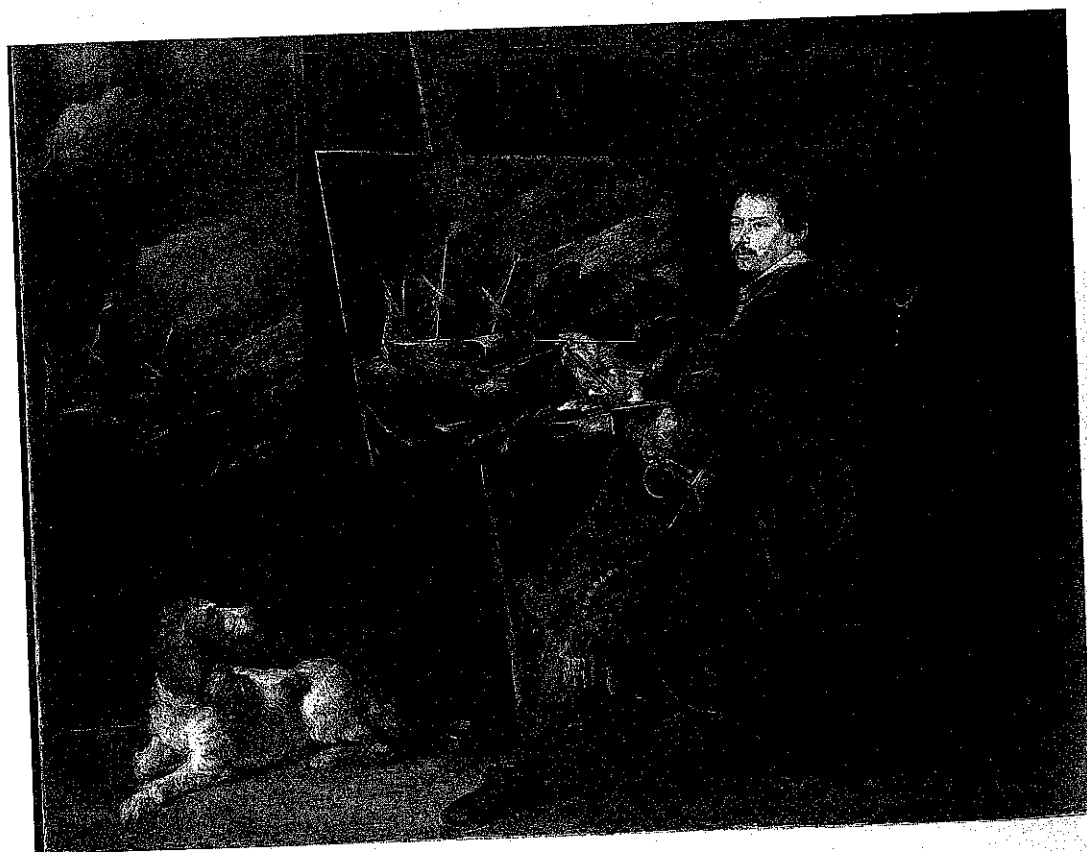
20. HIERONYMUS RODLER, engraving for *Eyn schön nützlich büchlin und underweisung der kunst des Messens*, Simmern, 1531. (Photo: S.H.A., Fribourg.)

22. A. VAN DYCK,
*Portrait of the Painter
Andreas Van Ertfeld*,
1632, oil on canvas,
173 × 226 cm,
Schleissheim,
Staatsgalerie.
(Photo: Bayerische
Staatsgemäldesamm-
lungen, Munich.)

The actual dimensions of the painting, quite inferior to those of the window, clearly demonstrate that the illusionism should be appreciated by relativizing its components. Only then is it possible to understand that we are not in front of a *window*, but rather in front of a *painting of a window*. Hung on the wall or displayed in a glass case (as it is nowadays in the Munich Pinakothek), this work of art does suggest an illusory opening in the wall. It is not a "landscape *trompe l'oeil*." What the painting is doing is *presenting the genesis of a landscape* or, if you like, *of the landscape*. The painted window is the residue of an interior *from which* the landscape detaches itself, but *through which* it is defined and therefore made possible. We could call this frame an "autobiographical" feature of the landscape. It acts as the mediator between the "real tempest" and the "landscape of the tempest."

This mediation is quite clear in Van Dyck's *Portrait of the Painter Andreas Van Ertfeld* (1632; Fig. 22). It portrays a "seascape" in the act of being painted: The painting is on the easel; the "view" is in the embrasure of the window.

There are also important texts that give detailed explanations that relate to the *topos* of the "split perception" of the seventeenth-century



tempest, as, for example, in the *Entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugène* (1671):

MARGINS

"Is it not still most pleasant to see a well equipped ship sailing majestically on the seas as though it were a great body seeming to move by itself? Moreover," Eugène added, "is there anything more moving and entertaining than to see a ship, a plaything to winds and waves?"

"You are very relaxed about this," interjected Ariste, "for I am sure that if you had been in a shipwreck as I have, in the mood you are in, you would not find the sea so beautiful in its rage, or you would at least find the portrait more beautiful than the original. After all, you must admit," he continued, "that it is necessary to be extremely robust to expose yourself for the first time to such a turbulent element."

"I do admit it," said Eugène, "and am even of the opinion that unless we pride ourselves of our robustness at the wrong time, we are content to observe tempests from a distance. Perhaps the angry sea is even more beautiful from a distance and in perspective."²⁴

Porcellis' artifice does in fact reside in that the shipwreck has been "put into perspective," through – to use the words of the *Entretien* – having been transformed from "original" into "portrait." The spectator is invited to feel a part of an *inner* space whose boundary is the window. But this inner space (invisible in the painting and only suggested by the transposed embrasure) is not ours. It can only be an image-space: that of the genesis of the landscape.

The "autobiographical" element is in fact very much present in the entry page to be seen in the lower corner of the painting. What is remarkable is that despite their being geographically and culturally separated, Porcellis and Sánchez Cotán deal with the question of the signature in the same spirit.

He does not sign (and date) directly onto the frame, but on a page appended to it in an unstable equilibrium. This page is like a *cartellino* without really being one. Its fundamental importance to the message of the representation is underlined by its size: Compared to the smallness of the window/painting, the sheet of paper is disproportionately large. It looks as though it might detach itself at any minute from the edge of the painting to glide toward its "this side of." The page determines the actual moment when the view from the window becomes painting. The inscription appended to it (1629/*Joannes porrc[ell]is*) is like a sign of a presence/absence.

Like the inscriptions of the early Flemish masters, the signature could be seen to be a testimony: 1629/*Joannes Porcellis fuit hic* – "1629. Joannes Porcellis was here." But the purpose of the inscription is probably greater than this: the tempest (*procella*) on one side and the author (Porcellis) on the other. The metathesis of quantity comes into play here in order to thematize once more the autobiographical nature of the representation.²⁵ "In 1629, Joannes Porcellis was this: this vortex, this tempest."

Doors

All representations of interiors envision the room with the fourth wall eliminated. The missing partition – an essential element in all intimist fiction – is replaced by the surface of the pictorial image. To study this mechanism of substitution is, in a way, to make (remake) the history of European painting. My objective is less broad: It focuses on the representation of interiors where the “fictional” aperture is confined to the door frame.

Doors and windows are tenuously linked constructive realities. Their value as the matrix of an image though acts in a very different way. The window opens the interior up to the outside. It is the outside that we look at through the window. The door does not belong to the visual. We come and go through the door. We look through the window. Since Alberti, it is the window and not the door that has taken on the role of metaphor for the painting.

But if structurally the window implies being indoors looking out (in this case, from culture to nature), the door may also be the object of a visual process the other way round. If we look through a door toward the outside, the door's sole function is that of a pseudowindow. It is when we look *toward the interior* that it takes on a definition. Furthermore, it is not simply the act of looking from the outside toward the inside (which is always an option of course) that actually gives it its particular essence, but *the gaze from one interior to another interior*. The door pierces the wall between two bedrooms, two rooms, two areas. It is a less penetrating boundary than the window, which divides “culture” from “nature.” The door is no more than a hiatus at the heart of the world of “culture.”

If the embrasure of the window acts as a matrix for all painting, especially sixteenth-century landscape painting, the embrasure of the door, on the other hand, unfailingly focuses on domestic space. The door can act as a matrix in paintings of “interiors” when it comes to those that belong to this “genre.” One could even say that as a general rule, the frame around a painting of an interior is consubstantial with the door frame in the same way that the frame of a landscape is with the window frame.

The split performed by the picture frame as door embrasure has its roots in the art of the Middle Ages. This motif truly emerged in fifteenth-century Flemish painting, which shows how once again this period was an inexhaustible storehouse of spatial solutions that we need to take into consideration. It is the work of Rogier Van der Weyden (Fig. 23) that provides the most rarefied use of the “diaphragm arch,”²⁶ a use that raises questions peculiar to the period.

The diaphragm arch interposed between the actual picture frame and the area of the painting usually takes on the appearance of a portal, thus simultaneously embodying a symbolic function and that of a cut. We

should probably take into account – and this goes for the whole period – that the pictorial work was generally hung in an architectural location (a church) that made the diaphragm arch valuable not only as a cutting agent, but also a linking agent between the different scenes of an altarpiece or between the enframement of the altarpiece and the area where the work of art was being exhibited.

The mingling of genre and religious painting produces the actual theme of a work that in this context takes on a paradigmatic value. This work, by an anonymous German artist, depicts *St. Luke Painting the Madonna* (Fig. 24). It once formed part of the altarpiece in the Augustinian Church in Nuremberg.²⁷

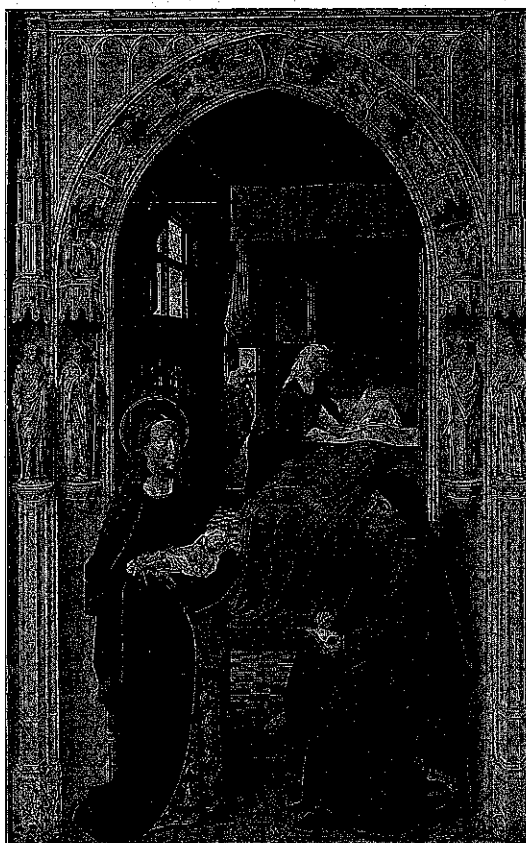
The artist is seated at his easel in a room separated from the one where the model stands by a step and an embrasure. The painting he is working on is in front of the opening and parallel to it. He shows the spectator a reduced version of the scene located beyond the threshold of the room: Between the embrasure and the boundaries of the painting, dialogue and consonance are perfect. The intimist nature of the whole representation and the domestic atmosphere of Mary's room transform the painting into a "pseudositting." The artist had to resort to one or two of the elements of the symbolic code to remind the spectator that the subject of the representation is sacred. In the foreground of Mary's room, her name appears on a vase. The written sign is to guard against possible confusion. Other elements have been added: the halos of the Madonna and Child, the cross formed by the artist's brush and baton.

But what makes this work of art a first-class document on the relationship between image and frame is the way the artist has enlarged his pictorial discourse. Through the two windows, landscapes can be seen, which indicate a well-executed awareness of the window functioning as a frame. Mary's window enters into a dialogue with the embrasure of the door; and Luke's with the picture frame itself. The latter can be regarded as an "absent partition" or as an invisible open door. The way Mary's bedroom door is connected – on the extreme left – with the picture frame presupposes that the dialogue between the areas was one of the artist's main preoccupations.

Like the "pure interior," the "pure genre" is a later invention. It is difficult if not impossible to determine the role the door frame played in their emergence. Although in the case of the niche with objects or the window with landscape, it was possible to follow a continuous line that led more or less directly from the incunabula of the Renaissance to the birth of the seventeenth century, the interior rejects an exclusively historical approach. Any attempt, therefore, to establish (for example) a link between Vermeer's painting and that of Van der Weyden is in this respect methodologically false and, in the end, pointless. To bear in mind

THE SURPRISED
EYE

23. ROGIER VAN
DER WEYDEN,
Altarpiece of St. John,
left panel, post-1450
(?), oil on wood,
77 × 48 cm, Berlin-
Dahlem, Staatliche
Museen. (Photo:
Staatliche Museen
Preussischer
Kulturbesitz,
Berlin.)



that fifteenth-century Flemish painting was in the seventeenth century considered to be "classical" – that is to say, an inexhaustible storehouse of solutions and "archetypal" inspirations – is, on the other hand, an incontrovertible necessity.

Only the morphological confrontation can throw any light on the mechanism that governed the formation of seventeenth-century artistic images. But the confrontation would be meaningless if it neglected to bring out both the *analogy* with the fifteenth-century classical period and – much more importantly – the *difference*. In the context of our discussion, the following fact is inherent in this *difference*: Although in the fifteenth century the motif of the door was emerging in experimental and variable forms, it never accomplished any real meta-artistic evolution; but in the seventeenth century, it became a *topos* used as a method of self-definition by paintings of interiors. It is difficult to believe from what we know that the morphology of the door had any direct repercussions on the emergence of the indoor scene. By the time it does appear, however, it is an *interpretative sign* and not a *genetic sign*. Even more than to its actual genesis, it belongs to the moment of meditation on the structural features of paintings of domestic interiors. That is why it is necessary to wait until the second half of the



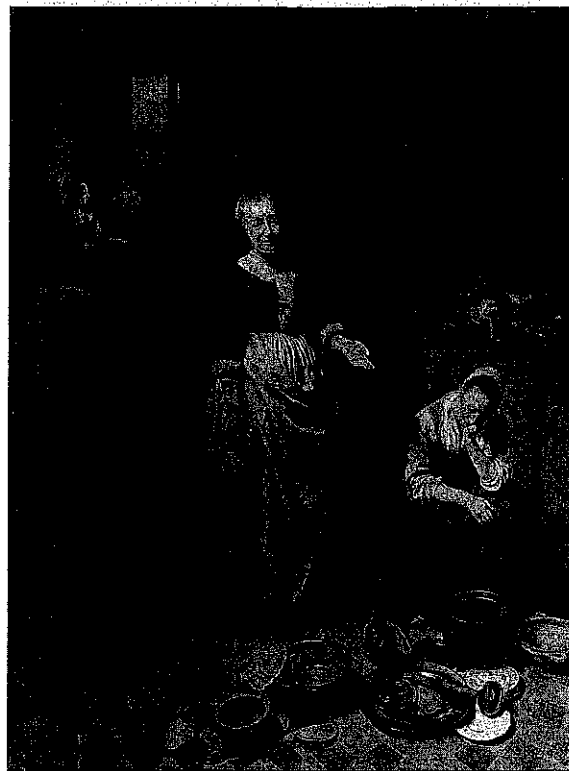
MARGINS

24. MASTER OF THE
AUGUSTINIANS'
ALTARPIECE, *St.
Luke Painting the
Portrait of the Virgin*,
1487, oil on wood,
Nuremberg,
Germanisches
Nationalmuseum.
(Photo:
Germanisches
Nationalmuseum,
Nuremberg.)

century for paintings of interiors (already much in evidence for several decades) to be identified with the cut/door frame. Around 1650–5, the motif of the door reappeared in Dutch painting in its traditional role of separating two areas of the painting. One of the first dated works of art in which this revival seems to have been a conscious undertaking is Nicolas Maes' *Lazy Servant* (1655; Fig. 25) today in the National Gallery in London.²⁸ It is a genre painting with moral undertones.²⁹ When we compare it to Pieter Aertsen's split paintings (Fig. 1), the differences are unmistakable. In Maes' work (Fig. 25), the background scene is like a second genre scene, like an "indoor scene" within another indoor scene. In the foreground, the spectator has access to the painting through the picture frame and in the middle ground, through that of the door. These two frames are parallel and – just like in Aertsen's – signifying an area of contact. The painting's "dialogue-like" nature is emphasized by the central figure of the smiling servant who addresses the spectator, talks to him, watches him, thus introducing him in an almost physical way, into the painting. A sizeable collection of paintings done by Nicolas Maes during this period bears witness to the lighthearted but continuous interest the post-Rembrandt generation had for the problem of embedded images. Many "minor

THE SURPRISED
EYE

25. NICOLAS MAES,
The Lazy Servant,
1655, oil on wood,
70 × 53.3 cm,
London, National
Gallery. (Photo:
National Gallery,
London.)



artists" like Pieter de Hooch and Emmanuel de Witte were to make this gazing through the door (which, in the meantime, had already been given the name of *doorkijje*,³⁰ a regular motif in their works of art.

Around the 1660s, the door frame became in a very distinctive way the duplicate of the picture frame. We can trace its simultaneous progress in several Dutch centers. It seems at times as though an ironic dialogue with tradition were taking place. To give but one example, the diaphragm arch device is interpreted and effected by one Jan Steen, in a way that is quite profane. *The Awakening* (Fig. 26) introduces the spectator into the privacy of a Dutch interior.³¹ The arch of the entrance contrasts as much with the rectangular picture frame as it does with the cubic area of the interior. It is almost reminiscent of the heroic *modus* to be found is at the heart of a song with a double meaning.

In Samuel van Hoogstraten's *View on a Corridor*³² (Fig. 27), the same motif results in a solution entirely centered on the interaction between the areas. Running parallel to the problem of the "pure interior" as a never-ending string of embrasures, there is evidence of experimentation that was to lead to his famous "perspective boxes."³³

In a work of art related to the *Corridor* and that has been recently attributed to the same artist, the meta-artistic discourse becomes clearer. I am referring to the *View through Three Rooms* (also known as *The Slippers*)



26. JAN STEEN, *The Awakening*, London, Buckingham Palace. (© 1994 Her Majesty the Queen Elizabeth II.)

now in the Louvre and formerly attributed to Pieter de Hooch³⁴ (Fig. 28). The central frame – that of the door in the foreground – dominates the area of the painting. It opens onto a narrow corridor that leads finally to a second frame, behind which there is an interior containing just a few objects. The open door of this last room is indicated by the keys left in the lock and silhouetted against the back wall. A black framed painting of an interior, in the style of Terborch, hangs on this wall and provides – as a second-degree reality – what was missing in Hoogstraten's other painting: the presence of a human figure.

The relationship between the interior-painting and the interior-seen-through-the-door becomes clearer if we return to the foreground of the representation: The actual painting is in fact the embrasure of a door. The latter can also be found, pushed open on the extreme right of the painting where the latch is still visible.

One should refrain, however, from interpreting these works of art as pure *trompe l'oeil*. They could not have been conceived as false "holes" in the wall, because they are barely 1 meter high. These paintings should be seen as establishing a dialectic among frame, image border, painting, and wall, a dialectic to which I shall have occasion to return.

Two other examples might further clarify the variety of solutions, which were the object of the self-definition of the interior as a pictorial genre. The first is Vermeer's famous *Love Letter* in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam (Fig. 29). As with most of this artist's works of art, it is very small (44 × 38.5 cm). The interaction between

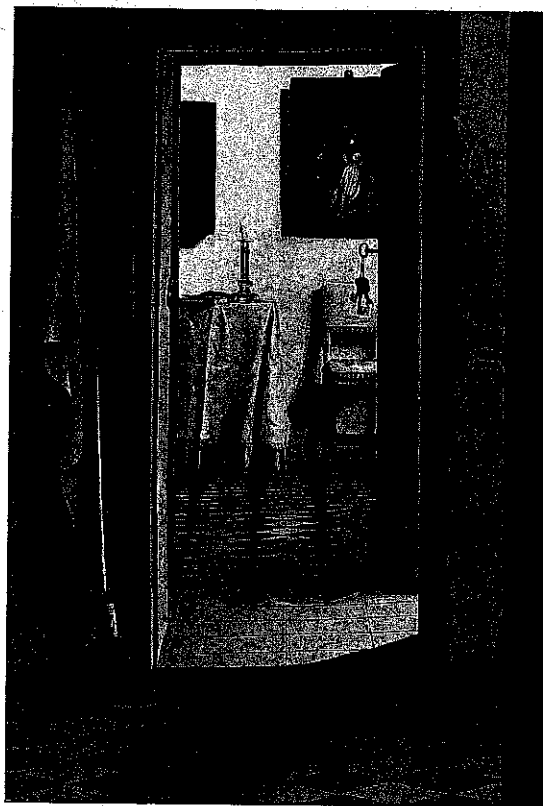
THE SURPRISED
EYE

27. SAMUEL VAN
HOOGSTRATEN,
View on a Corridor,
1662, oil on canvas,
264 × 136.5 cm,
Dyrham Park,
Gloucestershire (The
National Trust).
(Photo: S.H.A.,
Fribourg © The
National Trust.)



the areas is reminiscent of Hoogstraten's paintings, which are some 10 years older than this one. In Vermeer's work, the foreground is obviously an "outside-the-door." The picture frame is more or less square and leaves no room for confusion: Rather than an interior, the foreground is a fragment of an interior portraying a still-life. Compared to the real interior, visible beyond the embrasure of the door, it is like a high-toned foreground. The accentuated verticality of this aperture and that it has been placed off center are no doubt intentional. This time, the interior framed by the door contains two characters and there are two landscape paintings on the wall. The horizontality of the seascape, which is also uncentered, contrasts with the verticality of the

ma
lan
dis
tua
(Fig
arti
He
as
inte
han
tor
Ho
of
165
tho
ous
for
Lor
gro
his

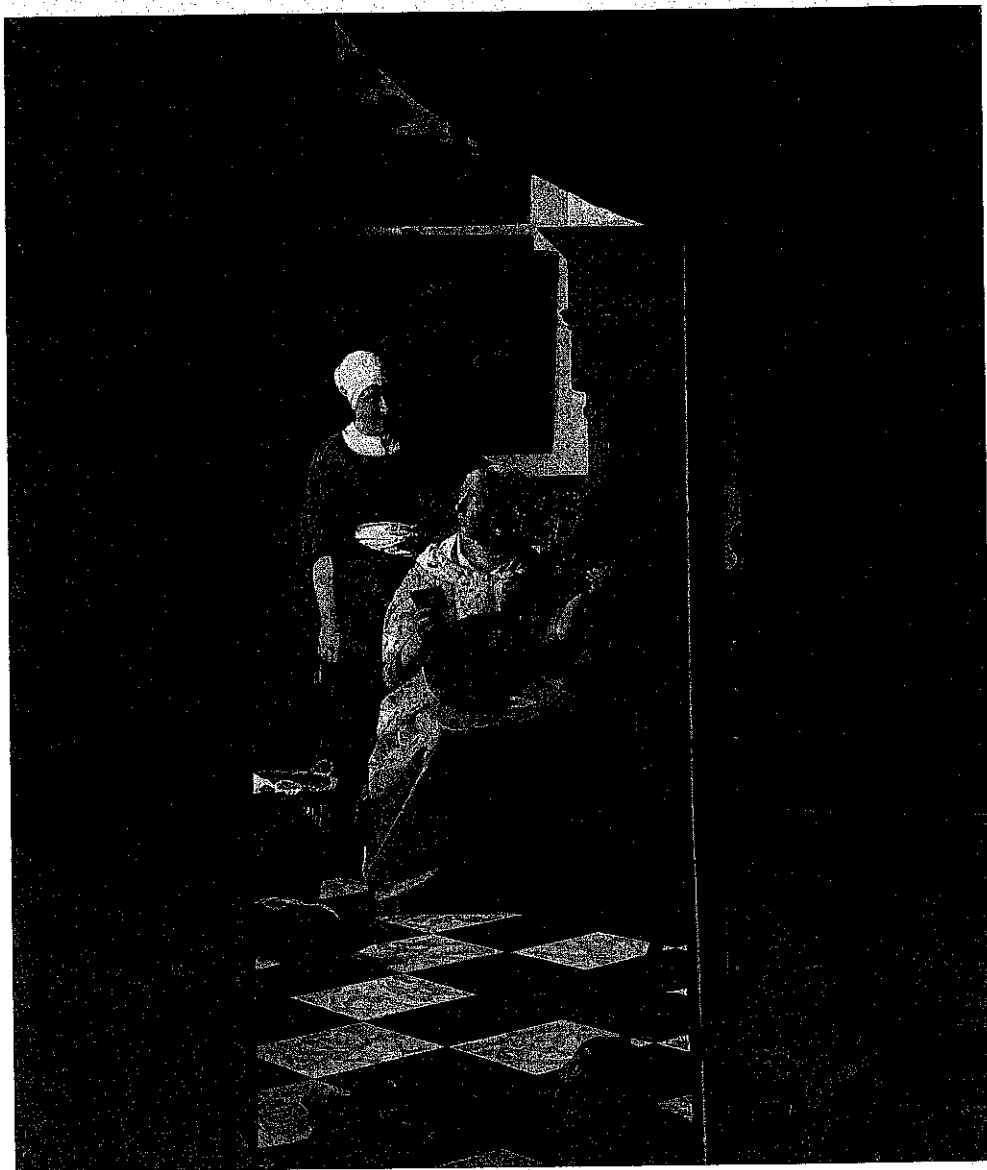


28. SAMUEL VAN
HOOGSTRATEN,
*View through Three
Rooms*, 1658, oil on
canvas, 102 × 71
cm, Paris, Louvre.
(Photo: R.M.N.
Paris.)

main scene (and with that of the frame). Still-life, framed interior, and landscape are like three versions of the picture disappearing into the distance.

The final example I should like to discuss also represents the eventual outcome of having a door frame in a painting. *The Glass Declined* (Fig. 30) in the National Gallery in London is also the work of a Delft artist identified with Pieter de Hooch, Samuel Van Hoogstraten, or Hendrick Van der Burch.³⁵ It is an indoor scene that could be described as "typical." There is, however, one feature that makes it of particular interest: On the extreme left of the painting, we can see the edge and handle of a door that has just been opened, thus allowing the spectator to "enter" the interior: The *doorkijkje* has become a painting. However, we should refrain from regarding this to be the end result of a linear evolution of the motif. This painting probably dates from 1655: It is therefore – chronologically speaking – an earlier work than those of Hoogstraten (Figs. 27 and 28) and Vermeer (Fig. 29) previously mentioned. It demonstrates the synchronicity of interest, clearly formulated for the meta-artistic elements of the enframement. In the London painting (Fig. 30), the presence of the mirror in the background brings an element of intrigue to the composition: By turning his back on the company, the person reflected therein is in reality

some 10
is obvi-
square
the fore-
ompared
it is like
aperture
nal. This
and there
y of the
ity of the



29. VERMEER OF DELFT, *The Love Letter*, ca. 1667, oil on canvas, 44 × 38.5 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum. (Photo: Rijksmuseum-Stichting, Amsterdam.)

watching what is taking place on the other side of the frame/door. He is the spectator's ambassador in the painting (in front of the mirror, he is in the position of the spectator in front of the painting) and also his interlocutor.

Art theory at the time used a progressive codification for the *door-kijkje*. In Hans Vredeman de Vries' *Perspective* (1604), there are several engravings that bear witness to the author's interest in the correct representation of the interior seen through a door or diaphragm arch (Fig. 31). De Vries elaborated an extremely successful "science of apertures" (*doorzichtkunde*). That is how, in the middle of the century, the view through a door ended up signifying *Painting* itself. On the title page of Philippe Angel's *Lof der Schilder-konst* (1642; Fig. 32), Pallas Athena



30. ANONYMOUS
OF DELFT, *The
Glass Declined*, ca.
1650-5, oil on can-
vas, 117 × 92 cm,
London, National
Gallery. (Photo:
National Gallery,
London.)

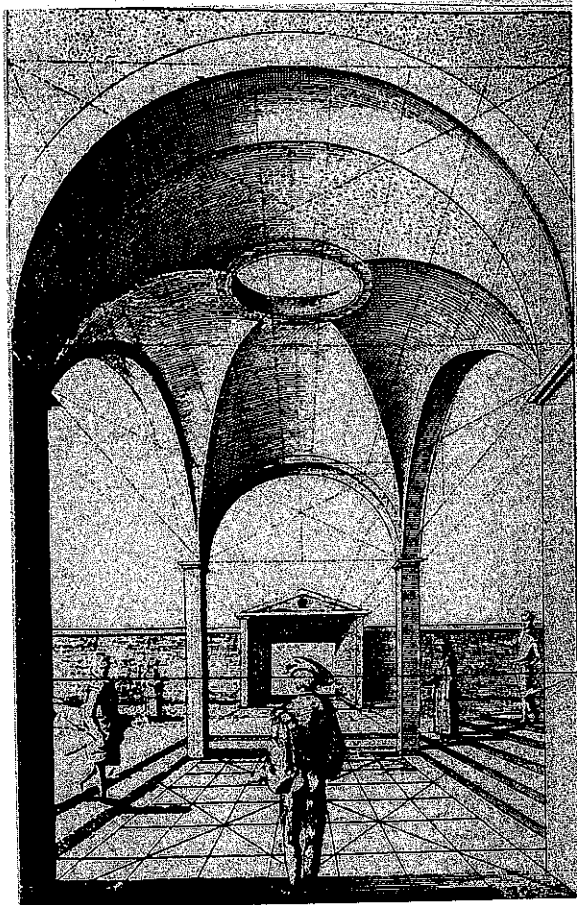
is the personification of *Pictura*.³⁶ In one hand, she holds a palette, brushes, and an artist's maulstick, and in the other, a board that represents a *door-kijkje*. A similar representation can be found on the title page of Samuel Maroloys' *Perspective* (1637; Fig. 33), where *Pictura* is holding a *door-kijkje* and standing on a plinth on which rests, within the rectangle of a window, the reproduction of Alberti's diagram of the *costruzione legittima*. Window frame and door frame are thus juxtaposed, but it is the latter that forms the "new" characteristic of the new painting.

Frames

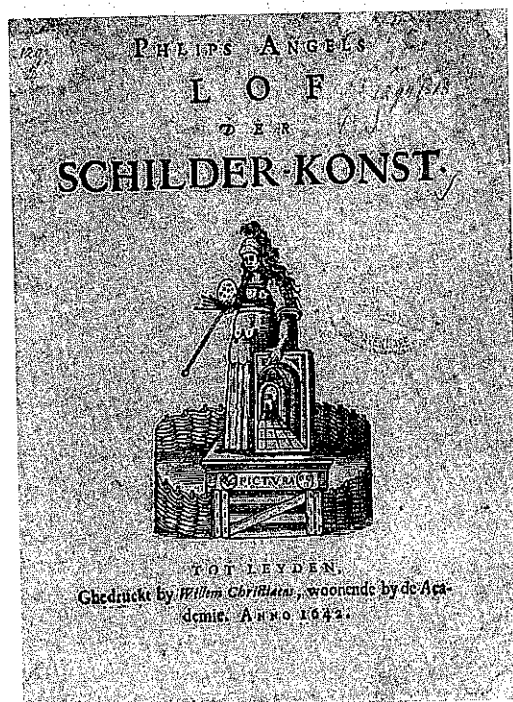
Niches, windows, and doors are all parts of reality that are characterized through their capacity to define a field of vision. They are also a negation of the wall and an affirmation of another space. The pictorial representation of the niche, window, or door derives from a meta-artistic mechanism that acts as a dialogue between the existential cut and the imaginary cut. Despite their intrinsic differences, the paintings previously analyzed had at least one trait in common: They contained a part of the context of their genesis. The part was no coincidence, for it allowed the image to be defined within the frame. By transforming the context (or fragment of the context) into painting, seventeenth-century artists were taking into account their explorations of the image's boundary and the relationship this boundary had with the real world.

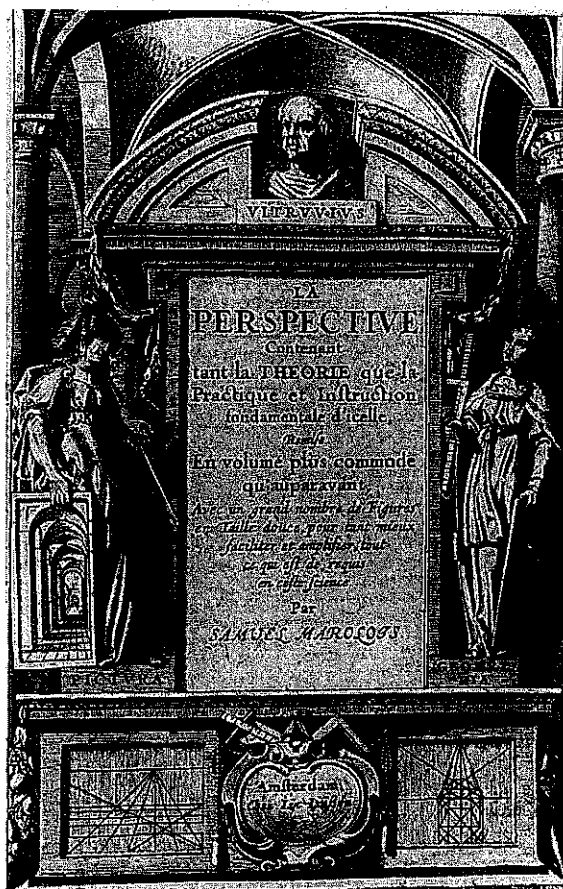
THE SURPRISED
EYE

31. JAN VREDEMAN
DE VRIES, engrav-
ing for *Perspective*,
Leiden, 1604.
(Photo: S.H.A.,
Fribourg.)



32. ANONYMOUS,
Title page to *Lof
der Schilder-konst* by
Philippe Angel,
Leiden, 1642.
(Photo: S.H.A.,
Fribourg.)





33. ISAACK VAN AELST, Title page to *Perspective* by Samuel Maroloys, Amsterdam, 1637. (Photo: S.H.A., Fribourg.)

The reproduction of "real openings" in painting can be regarded as the image's "autobiographical confession," a confession that must be interpreted on the correct level, namely, the metaphoric level. To be more precise: still-life pieces, landscapes, and interiors are in no way, *a fortiori*, views of a niche, through a window or door; but it can be confidently maintained that paintings that depict a niche, window, or door are confirmation of a meditation on the structural consubstantiality between the picture frame and all other types of enframement. This meditation becomes even more complex in a further series of works of art where the split is no longer effected through a halftone frame, but through the incorporation of the picture frame itself, corresponding to a relationship of identity.

★ ★ ★

All picture frames establish the identity of the fiction. To give a painting a painted frame, in addition to its actual frame, indicates that the fiction has been raised by the power of 2. The painting with a painted frame establishes itself twice as a representation: It is the image of a painting. Just like the representation of "real" framing already analyzed, that of the pictorial frame transforms a part of the whole setting into paint-

ing. The only but no less major difference lies in that, although the window or door frame reveals the context of the work of art's *genesis*, the representation of the "cornice" or "border" – to use the terms current at the time – incorporates a portion of the context of the *exhibition* of the work.³⁷ In both cases, however, the two methods are linked by the contact established between the "communicating state" of the pictorial message and the "receiving state" of this same message.

In paintings that contain door frames, window frames, or niches, the spectator is invited to see the image through the eyes of the artist/communicator. He is positioned in front of the communicating state. In paintings that have false frames, it is the artist who splits himself by putting himself (and his work) in a receiving state. In both instances, the boundaries of the image are elicited. The respective roles of artist and viewer should, one way or another, be interchangeable.

Before dealing with the different methods used to represent the cornice in the pictorial field, we should try to understand its significance in the seventeenth century. A contemporary treatise on art makes this quite clear:

As well as serving to embellish paintings, Frames also help to accentuate them. Moreover dealers and collectors claim that they never exhibit their paintings unless they have a border to enhance their impact. That is why the Italians say that an attractive border, which they call a cornice, is *il ruffiano del quadro*.³⁸

Recent studies on the subject have shown that, at that time, there was no longer a genetic suture between image and cornice.³⁹ Unlike the Renaissance frame, with its quasiarchitectural function and form, the "modern" frame acquires a certain flexibility. The consequence of the generalization of the rectangular format, the liberation of the painting from one compulsory location (in this case, church or chapel), was to establish a free relationship between image and cornice. A painting can be given one kind of enframement or another, which can be changed every few years without the aesthetic value of the work of art suffering in any way. Freedom is almost total.

Poussin's famous letter to Chantelou (April 28, 1639) on the subject of *The Israelites Gathering Manna in the Desert* is one of the best illustrations of this. More than any other document from the period, it explains how important the framing of a work of art was to the artist:⁴⁰

... I wish to advise you that I am sending you your painting of the manna, by Bertholin, by the Lyon Mail. . . . When you have received it, I would implore you that if you find it good, embellish it with a bit of frame, for it needs it, so that when it is viewed as a whole the eyes' rays will be absorbed and not scattered around by receiving elements from the other neighbouring objects which, mingling with the things depicted, would become blurred. It would be most appropriate for the aforementioned cornice simply to be gilded with a matt gold which blends gently with colours without offending them.⁴¹

It should be recorded right from the start that in Poussin's letter, the image/frame relationship is paradigmatically illustrated: The artist creates the work of art, but it is up to the recipient, the collector, to give it a frame – a high priority dictated by the perception of the work, for it guarantees the painting its own unity and identity. We may justifiably ask ourselves what Poussin meant by "the other neighbouring objects which, mingling with the things depicted, would become blurred" and from which the "Manna painting" had to detach itself with the help of the cornice? Given that this painting was destined to a great collector, we may suppose that "the other neighbouring objects" were indeed other paintings. This would mean that to Poussin, the cornice was not only what separated the work from the world, but also what separated one work from another. The cornice is a condition that enables the work of art to be truly perceived and admired. Indeed, the artist returns to it at the end of his letter:

It would be most appropriate to decorate it a little before displaying it. It should be hung not too far above eye level. . . .⁴²

The cornice on its own is not enough to give the painting its ideal visibility. The painting must be hung in harmony with the ideal spectator and in accordance with perspective. This means that the frame, along with the perspective, enters into the system that guarantees the work's perspective unity.⁴³ As with perspective, which, on the one hand, organizes the pictorial field, and, on the other, conditions the position of the spectator facing this field, once the painting is exhibited, the cornice will be just as much a participant in the beholder's world as in that of the image. It must – according to Poussin – be "gilded with a matt gold which blends gently with colours without offending them." This is a thought-provoking instruction.

The same Chantelou informs us that "Mr Poussin always implores us only to put borders around his paintings which are plain and without burnished gold."⁴⁴ Even if the testimony of Poussin's great patron cannot be taken as an absolute rule, we should consider the role played by the gilded cornice in the case of *The Israelites Gathering Manna in the Desert*. Poussin's painting was a great narrative composition, an *historia* conceived according to the principles of the heroic genre. The gilded frame – as was always the case in similar situations – increases the value of the rectangle it surrounds. It forms – as far as its exhibition is concerned – its *aura*.⁴⁵

★ ★ ★

As early as the sixteenth century, we find a marked interest in the projection of the frame into the area of the image. At the beginning, it was not the frame itself, but the shadow it cast over the area of the paint-

THE SURPRISED
EYE

34. JAN GOSSAERT
(called MABUSE),
*Portrait of Jacqueline
of Burgundy* (?), ca.
1520, wood, 37 × 28
cm, London,
National Gallery.
(Photo: National
Gallery, London.)



ing. It is during the same period in Flanders that we first come across the frame being reproduced in earnest. The way Jan Gossaert (known as Mabuse) tackled the idea is, however, quite unique. In a series of paintings, notably portraits dating for the most part between 1525–30 (Fig. 34), the characters depicted are set against a background framed by a carefully reproduced cornice. These backgrounds recapture the format of the painting, but are mostly feigned marble.

But there are also examples⁴⁶ in which the background seems to be a painting, prepared and framed, and located behind the person. These are the radical outcome of a figure/frame relationship whose most inspiring Italian examples (Botticelli, for one) Gossaert was able to study during his stay in the peninsular. But through the interaction between art and reality, Gossaert added illusionist connotations in which his own tradition is firmly rooted: Memling is the direct predecessor of this (Fig. 35).



35. HANS
MEMLING, *Portrait of
Mary-Madeleine
Portinari*, oil on
wood, 44 × 34 cm,
New York,
Metropolitan
Museum. (Photo:
Metropolitan
Museum, New
York.)

These paintings can be interpreted in two ways. The first interpretation assumes that there really is someone waiting to be painted on the prepared and framed painting to be found in the middle distance. The second considers the person painted as a figure that has just emerged from its frame like a portrait come to life.⁴⁷ Whichever interpretation is chosen, one fact remains certain: What Jan Gossaert is proposing with this series of works is not a variation on the theme of the "painting within a painting," but a gloss on the theme of the "painting out of the painting." The background presents us with the "aniconic field" of a frame without a picture, the foreground enshrines an image without a frame, outside the frame.

Even if Gossaert's experiment remains a rather isolated one, we already can make a general observation: Although the function of an effective

THE SURPRISED
EYE

36. REMBRANDT,
The Holy Family,
1646, wood, 46.5 ×
68.8 cm, Cassel,
Staatliche
Kunstsammlungen.
(Photo: Staatliche
Museen, Cassel.)



picture frame is to act as a caesura between “art” and “reality,” the painted frame serves to blur this boundary. The fact becomes quite evident in the experiments involving the split framing that seem to have originated in the 1640s. The work of art that seems, as far as we know, to have played a paradigmatic role is Rembrandt’s *Holy Family*, which is found in Cassel (Fig. 36).⁴⁸

It is a small painting on wood (46.5 × 68.8 cm) signed and dated 1646. It is an almost profane representation of an episode from the Bible. The sacredness of the characters – Mary, the Child Jesus, and Joseph – is barely perceptible, which is why the painting was sometimes entitled *The Carpenter’s Family*. It has a complicated painted frame whose uprights are two fluted pilasters that meet to form an arch shaped like the handle of a basket. Even more striking is the false frame, the *trompe l’œil* curtain that eclipses a good portion of the righthand side of the image. It seems to have been drawn so as to allow the spectator to contemplate the scene.

Because the binomial false curtain/frame was destined to have a brilliant career, we shall have to dwell a moment on the relevance of the disposition of the objects. Just like the frame, the curtain is an object that belongs to the painting’s expository accessories. Its history is long and – given its many implications – we need only skim through it. In the religious art of the Middle Ages, the *velum* played a part in the *mise en scène* of the altar painting, to veil/unveil originated from a dialectic on the presentation of images, in accordance with their liturgical function. It is significant that, toward the end of the sixteenth century but more especially in the seventeenth century, the religious purpose of the *vela* virtually disappears.⁴⁹ And it is exactly at this time that documents record the wider use of the curtain in presenting works of art of a private nature.⁵⁰ Its religious value is preserved in some cultural milieu⁵¹ and in others it acquires a strictly expository function.

The curtain protects the painting from dust and bright lights. It is only open when the proprietor wishes to show the painting or look at it (Figs. 55, 61, 63, 64, and 67).

Insofar as sources allow, we can isolate two categories of works of art that were given a curtain: masterpieces and pictures of a licentious nature. In the first case, apart from its protective function, it is its role as a visual barrier that explains why the curtain was used. By only unveiling the painting on special occasions, it did not deteriorate and its effect on the spectator was increased.⁵² When it comes to more or less licentious paintings, it has a somewhat different function. Velázquez's *Venus with Mirror* and Caravaggio's *Earthly Love* were only unveiled by the collector and for the benefit of his closest friends (usually men).⁵³

The motif of the *painted* curtain has also been around for a long time. However, we should establish the difference between the curtain as an iconographic motif *in* the painting and the representation of the curtain *on* the painting. The first has very little to do with any desire for self-definition on the part of the work of art. It is one of the symbols denoting the presence of royalty and the revelation of the sacred.⁵⁴ It is symptomatic, however, that in the seventeenth century, the motif of the curtain *in* the painting, by triumphing over some sectors of profane art, was called to a new life,⁵⁵ and that sometimes the spectator had difficulty deciding whether it was an object that belonged to the area of the representation or to that of the exhibition. The most famous example of this is Vermeer's *Letter from Dresden* (ca. 1659).

For the painted curtain to be considered as a contextual embellishment, it must be integrated into the false frame. This is precisely the case with Rembrandt's *Holy Family* (Fig. 36). When frame and curtain are no longer contextual pieces, the spectator finds the phenomenon disturbing and thought-provoking. At first, he might be deceived by the illusionism of the representation, but then he sees through the deception. The solution is simple: He does not find himself *before* any old painting, but *before a representation of a painting*. This dynamic attitude, founded on the binomial "deceive"/"undeceive" has been around since Antiquity (Pliny the Elder speaks of it in connection with the competition between Zeuxis and Parrhasios⁵⁶) and is extremely well illustrated in the seventeenth century by a text that has been virtually ignored by art historians despite the fact that it is a repertoire of how art was received at the time. We refer to Binet's *Essay*.

What attitude should be taken, therefore, when contemplating a painting like Rembrandt's *Holy Family*?

Here is Binet's reply:

... let us shout out for the curtain to be removed so that we may see what is hidden behind it, however there is nothing there for everything is flat, close, low, dead. . . .⁵⁷

In Rembrandt's work, the paradox of "deception" is accentuated by the artist's signature (*Rembrandt ft. 1646*) being transposed *into* the painting on a piece of furniture that is just in the area where the curtain has been raised. Rembrandt could have signed on the frame, for example (as demanded by tradition), in a corner of the canvas or even on the curtain. By signing there where the curtain is rising, he seems to be telling us that what is being uncovered is "a Rembrandt." The painting is a self-quotation, a quotation that has no other context than its own "quotation marks" (frame/curtain). That these quotation marks refer to a wider context (collection, interior hung with paintings) goes without saying, but it is for the beholder to reconstruct it mentally.

In the 1650s, Rembrandt's invention finally triumphed over profane art. Of his pupils, it was Gerard Dou and Nicolas Maes who accomplished the most interesting variations on the theme. In Maes, interaction between representation and self-awareness within the representation became highly evolved. The so-called *Eavesdropper*⁵⁸ (Fig. 37) demonstrates how the motif of looking through the door, analyzed earlier, merges with that of looking through the picture frame.

Through a painted cornice, surmounted by a curtain rod, we see a kitchen interior, which in its turn gives onto a second interior, where, through the door, we glimpse a scene (probably a disagreement),⁵⁹ partly eclipsed by the curtain in the foreground. This curtain, which through its pronounced *trompe l'oeil* character belongs in the spectator's space, also conceals the right-hand area of the painting, thereby denying us

37. NICOLAS MAES,
The Eavesdropper, ca.
1655, wood, 45.7 ×
71.1 cm, Guildhall
Art Gallery,
London. (Photo:
Guildhall Gallery,
London.)



access to the intrigue. A powerful dialogue is established between painting and spectator, which is all the more powerful because it is actually interrupted. From her gestures, attitude, and expression, the person in the foreground – “the eavesdropper” – intimates, beckons. She has the same function as the servant in Maes’ aforementioned painting (Fig. 25) in London. But whilst in the latter, the interlocutor was in the foreground and the *doorkijkje* was apparently only a coincidence,⁶⁰ the eavesdropper is an acknowledged intermediary between the beholder and whatever is taking place beyond the door at the back. She is drawing our attention to this background of the representation. Her function is very close to that of other similar figures in seventeenth-century painting such as the old woman in Velázquez’s *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (Fig. 2), for example.

Just like Velázquez’s old woman, Maes’ servant is the ultimate heir of Alberti’s “commentator” and has a rhetorical role to play as the presenter of the imaginary discourse. She attracts our attention to what is going on in the background; she directs our gaze. In Velázquez’s work, the background is a “quasipainting.” In Maes’ work, it is a pure “recess,” the foreground – that is to say, the representation as a whole – being that which, with the help of the false frame and curtain, appears to be a “painting.” This painting is a pure representation of the process of pictorial communication.⁶¹

The figure of the Albertian “commentator” has nevertheless triumphed over the center of the representation. It was already there – as we have seen – in Aertsen’s split scenes (Fig. 1) – as “extra apostles” and like the gigantic apparition in the foreground of Velázquez’s painting (Fig. 2). But in the one as much as in the other, the commentators were a part of a complex narrative fabric. In Maes’ piece, the commentator occupies the center of the painting and is linked to the motif of the curtain. Drawn into the dialogue, the spectator is tempted to *remove the curtain* (as Binet would have said) by inevitably coming into conflict with the fiction of the binomial curtain/frame that forbids him from becoming an “agent” in the painting and unavoidably throwing him back into the position of “watcher.” As Wolfgang Kemp has demonstrated, the servant (who attracts) and the curtain (which eclipses) are the terms of a powerful “calling structure” on which rests the work of art as a whole. This structure is all the more evident because it interacts both with the representation and the self-awareness of the representation.

What we find here in its unadulterated state is what Roger de Piles, in terms of an era of intense artistic experimentation, considered to be the essential characteristic of painting as an art form:

True Painting is that which (as it were) attracts us by taking us by surprise: and it is only through the power of the effect it produces that we cannot help but go up to it, as though it had something to tell us.⁶²