Review

Marije Osnabrugge (ed.), *Questioning Pictorial Genres in Dutch Seventeenth-Century Art. Definitions, Artistic Practices, Market & Society*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2021, 401 pp. ISBN 9782503596242.



During a recent seminar, a student struggled with Clara Peeters's *Presumed Self Portrait with a Lavishly Decorated Table* (c. 1618): Were we to think of it as a portrait, a vanitas still life, or as an example of a flower piece? The conundrum arose because while the work does not fit neatly into any of these individual categories, it does borrow from each of them. The more critical queries, I believe, are: From where does this impulse to classify early modern Netherlandish works arise and what, if anything, do we have to gain by engaging in this exercise? These broad questions, which are particularly important given the perceived specialisation of seventeenth-century Dutch and Netherlandish painting, are the impetus for the collection of essays *Questioning Pictorial Genres in Dutch Seventeenth Century Art*, edited by Marije Osnabrugge.

The book assembles sixteen essays from as many contributors, many of whom were participants in the five-year research project *Un Siècle d'or? Repenser la peinture hollandaise du XVIIe siècle*, lead by Jan Blanc at the University of Geneva. As Osnabrugge acknowledges in her introduction, there have been multiple studies devoted to individual genres, from still life to landscape, portraits, history paintings, and even genre paintings. The stated intention of the volume, conversely, is to 'question and complicate the way "genre" functions as a leading principle in the study of Dutch art' (13). For this purpose, the essays are divided into three categories: Defining Genres, Artists and Genres, and The Market and Society. This structure was presumably designed to prompt the reader to avoid letting received notions regarding Dutch genres dictate one's analytical framework. The result, however, is that there is a lack of discussion among the essays, which tend to feel simply gathered rather than interwoven together. Having said that, all essays are clearly connected to the topic and broad answers emerge, not the least of which is that genres are anything but watertight compartments.

DOI 10.51750/emlc.29177 - URL: http://www.emlc-journal.org
Publisher: Stichting EMLC
Copyright: The Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

The essays in the volume can be read out of the order in which they are presented, and several theoretical dialogues are suggested in the conclusion of this review. However, Osnabrugge's introduction and Blanc's essay on the hierarchy of genres anchor the book and should be read first. By using Jan Steen's history painting *Erysichthon Selling His Daughter Mestra* (c. 1650-1660) as a point of departure, Osnabrugge immediately puts the reader – who is likely much more familiar with Steen as a painter of tavern and raucous family scenes – on notice that the artist possessed a variety of skills and that he obviously did not think of himself as constrained in his selection of subject matter. The use of this example to delineate the principal objectives and themes of the volume is clever, as it immediately challenges the notion that seventeenth-century artists focused on one or two genres, rather pointing out that the best artists, like Steen, had a number of skills in their toolbox, which they could deploy as required to best fit the market and their strengths. The introduction concludes with a helpful list of ten underlying principles that can be gleaned from the essays. Although too numerous to summarise in this review, two seem especially noteworthy: The first is that unless specifically constrained, 'artists had the agency to experiment and develop different ways of representing subjects (in reaction with the art market and their personal inclination)' (16). A second is that how a genre has come to be conceptualised and even appreciated can arise from the reception and understanding given to a category or class of subject matters *ex post facto*. Put differently, it is highly unlikely that the artists who made the paintings and the contemporaries who received them ever felt constrained or puzzled by the construction and meaning of genres, unlike later critics and scholars.

This is not to say, however, that subject matter categorisation did not exist. The extent to which these categories were quite as hierarchical as we tend to believe today, with history painting being the most prestigious, is the subject of Blanc's essay. He argues that whereas early modern authors such as Alberti, Félibien, and Van Hoogstraten did consider still life painting as the most inferior of genres and history painting as the most superior, they nevertheless acknowledged that some artists specialised in flower paintings, for example, could exceed in skill and talent those who painted mythological scenes. Blanc's analysis takes the reader through seemingly opposite pairs of concepts that can be helpful in construing of a hierarchy that is not solely guided by subject matter: universality vs. variety; tradition vs. novelty; and idealisation vs. reality. Blanc thus demonstrates that while it is true that genres were subject to a hierarchy during the seventeenth century, 'it would be wrong to consider that this hierarchy is the only one to prevail' (41).

Each of the six essays under the "Defining Genres" rubric turn to original sources such as Van Hoogstraten (mentioned above), Van Mander, Houbraken, Weyerman, and Pontius in their attempt to trace how genre would have been constructed and understood in early modernity. Weixuan Li uses digital language models to gain insight into the ways in which early modern consumers described and categorised painters and paintings (in a personal *schildersregister* and in inventories). She concludes that there was a large degree of overlap between the vocabulary used by well-informed consumers, estate appraisers, and specialists such as Houbraken in defining and categorising not only paintings, but also painters, based on complex constructions of genre and specialisation. Ann Jensen Adams, for her part, explores how one of the most straightforward-seeming genres, the

portrait, in fact contained multitudes. From portraits 'proper' to portraits in still lifes and landscapes and *portraits historiés* (to name only three of Adams' categories), the author argues that expanding our understanding of portraiture opens the door to the study of previously overlooked artworks and to a new appreciation for their function, among other things.

The second part of the book, entitled "Artists and Genres," explores in five essays how Jacques de Gheyn (Susanne Bartels), Otto Marseus van Schrieck (V.E. Mandrij), Rembrandt (Stephanie Dickey), Pieter Saenredam (Helen Hillyard), and Vermeer (Reindert Falkenburg) deployed their wide-ranging skills in creating works that borrowed from different genres and, as such, could not be easily classified. Thus, De Gheyn excelled at the depiction of natural life, but was highly successful with a series of engravings regarding the use of arms and armour. In creating his *sottoboschi*, Van Schriek brought together landscape painting, the cabinet of curiosity, and the sublime. Saenredam's striking churches combine ideals from landscape painting, while Vermeer elevated genre painting when he painted *The Little Street* (c. 1658), which can be conceived as an architectural *tronie*. The porosity of genres, posits Dickey, allowed Rembrandt to draw on his knowledge and understanding of the physiognomy of pain, which he had illustrated in *tronies* and genre paintings, when turning to history painting, thereby making the latter works highly successful. An argument that courses through this part of the book is that as artists borrowed from different genres, created hybrid genres, and relied on novel constructions to allow their skills to shine, they elevated the theoretical status of their work and opened them to new appreciation and interpretations.

The final section of the book contains four essays that consider how the understanding and construction of genres was shaped by forces largely external to artists: the art market (Angela Jager), transnationality (Tania De Nile), war (Léonard Pouy), and socio-cultural values such as honour (Wayne Franits). Jager challenges the long-held view that the popularity of history painting experienced a sharp decline during the second half of the seventeenth century, to the benefit of landscape painting. She finds that although the richest collectors owned a greater proportion of non-history paintings in their collections, the number of history paintings they owned remained largely stable, while members of the lower economic classes of collectors continued to favour history paintings. In her study, De Nile demonstrates the significance of artistic mobility in Jacob van Swanenburg's iconographies of hell, which fuse together the visual knowledge he gained during his stays abroad and which came to be known as "ghost scenes" (*spookerijen*), a loose, thematic genre. By focusing on the impact of external forces on genre, this part of the book thus connects neatly with Osnabrugge's assertion, in her introduction, that the more successful artists had at their disposal a versatility that allowed them to adjust to circumstances.

This book contains cutting edge scholarship. The reader must nevertheless do the heavy lifting in placing the essays in conversation with one another, whether it be on the question of self-reference and pictorial genres (Mandrij and Falkenburg); the multiple facets of portraiture (Adams, Middlekoop, and Pouy); the relationship between the market and how consumers understood genres (Li and Jager); or the impact of artistic mobility on the understanding of genre (Baverez and De Nile). The book will appeal particularly to

researchers and advanced graduate students, as the essays assume a high level of art historical and theoretical knowledge. In addition, editorial choices leave several quotations in Dutch, French, Italian and Latin untranslated (in addition to an essay being in French), which will be limiting for some. Nevertheless, the issues raised by the essays are important ones and are well worth the reader's efforts.

Catherine Powell-Warren, KU Leuven