# The Art of Writing During the Golden Age

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Art reflects the concerns and social priorities of different cultures in every era throughout the world, and the Dutch Republic of the 17th century is no exception. While the landscapes and portraits of the Golden Age capture the beauty and power of Dutch nationhood in the depiction of its territory and people, the genre paintings of seemingly every-day life by artists like Johannes Vermeer and Gabriel Metsu intrigue and attract great speculation with every passing century. It is within genre paintings that the viewer can step into the scene and interact with or become one of the figures, whether that be a woman diligently making lace, an amorous couple playing music, or a man or woman writing a letter. It is the latter that this essay shall focus on, and the following observations of its importance to both 17th century viewers and modern audiences. Paintings of people, though more often women, reading and writing during the Golden Age center around the themes of an emerging civilized class and the practice of exchanging love-letters, the combination of which created an opportunity for the Dutch to express the societal expectations of acceptable courtship behavior and idealized feminine qualities.

The Dutch masters who depicted subjects "usually elegantly dressed, with attractive bodies, erect postures, delicate hands, flawless skin, and controlled expressions on their faces" all developed unique stylistic techniques and pattern in subject matter that make it easy to distinguish a Vermeer from a Metsu[1]. It is these two artists who painted many of the more famous letter writing and reading scenes. Vermeer's women were often solitary, though maids frequently appear delivering a letter or waiting for their mistress to finish writing one. The pair of duet paintings *A Man Writing a Letter* and *A Woman Reading a Letter*, have similar qualities to Vermeer's works, but are clearly attributed to Metsu, who depicts what is a prime example of this genre's subject matter. It is the emergence of a wealthy merchant class that made the work of

[1] Muizelaar, K. *Picturing Men and Women in the Dutch Golden Age*, p. 118.

these artists possible, and the attention given to the representation of the educated in Dutch society makes their influence clear.

While the depiction of writing or reading a letter indicates there is literacy within a society, the true gauge of the level of scholarship or social standing is evidenced in what books are read by the portrait's subject. For the Dutch, the two books that revealed good social standing or morality were the Bible and *Houweleyck*, the latter being a guide to running a smoothly functioning household. Within it, a reader would find every stage of a woman's life categorized and purpose explained in detail; every woman would have read it or a similar book to it, and would eventually own one as a housewife[2]. In Dutch society, the woman was at the center of the household, holding everything together, as literally seen in the portrait of a well-to-do family in Franits' essay on the depiction of women's domesticity within Dutch portraiture[3]. The family was dependent on her for managing expenses and maintaining order, whether that was by providing a good example for the children or keeping an eye on the maid.

Woman's role as keeper of the house also extended to representing Dutch society on a larger scale. Often the well-educated or socially-adapt woman was associated with worldliness, symbolized by the inclusion of a globe in the painting[4]. As the Dutch continued to accrue power and wealth during the 17th century, maps were painted into portraits as reminders of Dutch expansion. Chapman highlights the effect the map's presence has on Vermeer's *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* 1663 – it adds another dimension of meaning to the woman's intent gaze on he object of her attention, "suggest[ing] a world opening up to her" possibly through the letter's

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[2] Franits, W. *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in 17th Century Dutch Art*, p. 5-6. See later points in essay about Franits' argument in this work. In regards to the painting mentioned: I neglected to note down the artist and title during my research and when I returned to the library to look for the information, the book had been taken out by another student. I talked to you about it in class.

[3] Ibid

[4] Jongh, E de. *Questions of Meaning: Theme and Motif in Dutch 17th Century Panting*, p. 60

writer or content[5]. The home was not only a place of domestic virtue as embodied by a woman, but also a sanctified place of rest and contemplation. It was the woman's job to keep it as such: "a refuge of peace, virtue, and prosperity, a secure bastion against the stresses and depredations of the outside world,"[6]. This idea of privatization in a world that was increasingly becoming larger would have been a comforting thought to any member of society. As the Dutch continued to expand their borders and trade routes, the intimacy of home would have become even more desired, as noted by Wieseman in the increase of paintings featuring a solitary figure engrossed in a private moment of thought or activity, such as in *The Love Letter* 1669 by Vermeer[7]. As Dutch society progressed and gained more international recognition, reading and writing in paintings took on a new meaning. Letter writing became an art form in itself and documents its increasing importance as a social construct that defined society.

Thousands of letters have been discovered by historians, like Judith Hokke (cited by Dekker and Carlson), that document how important letters were to building and maintaining relationships in the Netherlands during the 17th century[8]. Letters weren't simply for the young; they also served married couples who were separated due to business circumstances, as is the case with C.J. Malharte and his wife Christina[9]. While modern audiences of Dutch paintings may not understand the importance of letters in an age when communications is instant, 17th century viewers would easily identify with Vermeer's depiction of women putting aside everything to read, or possibly reread, a letter. Because "each letter sent and received carried enormous import," a Dutch viewer of Dirck Hals' *Woman Tearing Up a Letter* 1631, would have been

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[5] Chapman, H.P. Chapter 2: 'Inside Vermeer's Women'. Wieseman, M. *Vermeer's Women: Secrets and Silence*, p. 112.
[6] Wieseman, M. *Vermeer's Women: Secrets and Silence*, p. 7.
[7] Ibid, p. 49.
[8] Dekker. 'Women in the Medieval and Early Modern Netherlands', *Journal of Women's History*. (Carlson, M , Trans.), p. 171.
[9] Ibid, p. 172.

horrified[5]. It is important to note, however, the contextual clues the artist gives to better understand the painting, such as the turbulent seascape in the background, suggesting the letter's contents are not favorable[10]. Similarly, in Vermeer's *The Love Letter* 1669, the viewer may gain deeper insight to the letter being delivered, not only by the painting of ship in a calm sea on the back wall, but also by the maid's expression. It seems as if she knows something the recipient doesn't, or is asking about the letter itself. The interest of the maid could be interpreted as impertinent, but for the purpose of this argument, it enforces the claim that letter writing was important to the society as a whole, everyone from the wealthy to their servants.

There are two other paintings by Vermeer in which maids make an appearance in the process of letter writing. In *Lady with Her Maidservant Holding a Letter* 1667, the viewer cannot see the writer's face, but their eyes are drawn instantly to the hand motion of surprise or confusion made at the arrival of her maid with another letter. The artist purposefully doesn't give many details about the situation, instead leaving the viewer to create their own story about the importance of the unexpected letter's arrival[11]. Likewise, in *A Lady Writing a Letter with her Maid* 1665, Vermeer provides clues to the painting's story, but nothing that solidifies the true circumstances of the situation. A crumpled piece of paper, possibly a letter, lies on the floor, as a woman at a table concentrates on writing while her maid glances out the window. The painting on the wall of stormy seas could relate to a tempestuous relationship with a suitor, while the maid's look connects the safe interior with the chaotic reality outside. Above her hangs *The Finding of Moses*, insinuating that the letter-writer can be likened to a biblical standard of virtue[12]. The women in these paintings depict both the accepted courtship practices of the day

[10] Slive, S. *Dutch Painting 1600-1800*, p. 127.
[11] Wieseman, M. *Vermeer's Women: Secrets and Silence*, p. 52.
[12] Chapman, H.P. Chapter 2: 'Inside Vermeer's Women'. Wieseman, M. *Vermeer's Women: Secrets and Silence*, p. 112.

and idealized womanly behavior in their subtle gestures and guarded expressions. According to Franits' analysis they are, "generalized and objectified, their individuality and psychic dimension minimized," ultimately making the painting of them a mixture of "observed fact and invention,"[13]. While this portrayal of women is often seen as a common complaint in today's society, the 17th century viewers of Vermeer's work would have identified it as a goal for a dutiful wife or lover.

This romanticized theme of idealized women composing letters is also present in Metsu's paired pieces, *A Man Writing a Letter* 1664 and *A Woman Reading a Letter* 1664. Here the viewer is confronted with a private conversation via writing. Both pieces are stylistically similar: both are well lit from the window, various objects are geometrically placed throughout, and the color schemes compliment each other[14]. However, the two figures present different sides to the painter's story. As the woman reads her letter diligently, her sewing put aside, the maid lifts back a curtain to reveal a rough seascape, contrasting with the serene expression on the reader's face[15]. In the companion piece, objects of affluence surround the man: the globe in the corner, the oriental tapestry on the table, and the scenic painting on the wall. The couple represents an ideal model of Dutch society. The man is a master of his own world, well-educated, genteel, exuding confidence in his writing, and is handsome both in looks and composure. The woman is a master of her emotions and occupations, is beautiful, demure, and graceful. The couple is separated both physically and metaphorically, first by the picture frames and second by their separate spheres, conforming to society's expectations of proper conduct. Similar to Franits, Kettering observes that the female audience of these paintings would view them as models of

[13] Franits, W. *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in 17th Century Dutch Art*, p. 13-14.
[14] Waiboer, A. *Gabriel Metsu*, p. 22.
[15] Chapman, H.P. Chapter 2: 'Inside Vermeer's Women'. Wieseman, M. *Vermeer's Women: Secrets and Silence*, p. 108.

accepted behavior, "particularly [in] how they should interact with men" [16]. It is important to note, however, that it was not women who defined these virtues represented in Vermeer's and Metsu's paintings, but men. Men painted and purchased the art works, and under the guise of focusing on the woman within the painting, artists perpetuated "the behavior that was most prized in this male dominated society" [17]. A reciprocal relationship between viewer and painting was thus created and maintained in the Dutch art of the 17th century.

The idea of reciprocity is important not only in our understanding of genre paintings, but also in our perception of society as a whole. By depicting the rising merchant-class, artists like Vermeer and Metsu preserved the societal values of the 17th century, specifically ones that stemmed from the spread of literacy. While the subject matter sometimes varies between writer and receiver, the theme of material and personal affluence is still conveyed. Although they represent only a certain percentage of the population, the elegant men and women caught up in the seemingly mundane task of writing capture the Dutch aspiration for idyllic contemplation and adherence to the expectation of quiet composure and polished propriety. Women specifically epitomize these values, and, as previously discussed, provide modern audiences with a better understanding of the importance of letter writing within Dutch society. Just as the letter writers shared a reciprocal relationship, so too do the viewers and participants of that private pastime. While the interaction between the painting's subject and 17th century female viewers may have been passive or unrealized, the same cannot be said of their 21st century counterparts. The study of Dutch genre painting, especially that of private correspondence, allows us to reflect on our own literate culture and how we participate in the representation of ourselves.

[16] Kettering, A. 'Ter Borch's Ladies in Satin', *Art History*, p. 104.
[17] Ibid, p. 113.

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