



Dutch Masters:

The modern realism of the Reformation

Andrew McIntyre

The Dutch Masters Exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria is the most comprehensive display of seventeenth-century Dutch art ever seen in Australia. An extraordinary naturalism and an almost obsessive observation of ordinary daily life radiate from these pictures.

Rarely has a school of art emerged which so effectively captures a crucial moment of social, economic and artistic change. But this exhibition pushes us to go further and ponder just what it was that happened in Europe at the time that makes these works so strikingly exceptional and also strangely contemporary.

Overwhelming in the genre paintings—landscapes, interiors, markets and still life—is the unassuming ordinariness of life. Jacob van Ruisdael's *View of Haarlem from the north-west, with the bleaching fields in the fore-*

ground conveys a dampness in the earth that one can almost smell. One can almost hear the wind across the forlorn plain, with the dapples of cold sunlight moving across the fields. Hendrick Avercamp's *Diversion on the ice*, Aert van der Neer's *River view in the winter* and Jan van de Cappelle's *Winter Scene* all conjure up daily life as it is lived, with a strong sense of the chill air in the nose. The ordinary sights of skaters, golfers on the ice, women washing in freezing water, and the distant buildings in the pale light have an immediacy that contrasts with the artificial and embellished Italianate landscapes of the same period.

Much has been made of the economic conditions, the openness and liberalism of the wealthy middle class in the Dutch Republic at the time to explain this change in sensibilities. To meet the demand for works of art for this new middle class, an extraordinary number of artists flourished, producing an equally extraordinary number of paintings—estimated to be between five and ten million works

during the century. The number of artists belonging to the official painters guild, the Guild of St Luke, was estimated at around 650–700, or about one painter for every 2,000–3,000 inhabitants, a ratio which far exceeded that of Italy.

Importantly, the fashion for painting spread even to the lower socio-economic classes, who also had significant access to the art market. Accounts of seventeenth-century travellers such as John Evelyn attest to this. He wrote, 'pictures are very common here [in the Netherlands], there being scarce an ordinary tradesman whose house is not decorated with them'.

Changed economic conditions, in conjunction with the Reformation, meant that there had been a seismic shift not experienced in Southern Europe; the Church and the aristocracy, which traditionally had funded the arts and commissioned works—reflecting religious themes and the hierarchical structure of the society—were largely replaced with the tastes of a new middle class. Particularly impor-

Andrew McIntyre is a regular contributor to the IPA Review

tant was the attitude of the Calvinists of the mid-sixteenth century who rejected religious iconography, statues and other paraphernalia in churches as idolatrous. As a result, commissions with explicit religious themes dramatically reduced in number. Religious paintings made in the Netherlands after that date tended to be didactic, oral stories based on domestic life, instead of objects of veneration or meditation. One painting, *The Transept of the Mariakert in Utrecht, seen from the north-east* by Pieter Jansz Saenredam, is a stark reminder of this new reality. It epitomises the aesthetic difference and attitude to religion between the Protestant North and the Catholic South.

With such a remarkable divide in sensibility between the North and the South of Europe, it is fair to ask the question: were the ingredients that permitted this emergent middle class and the new market for art the sole cause? Is it just the economic success of individuals that can lead a society to turn to portraying the world as it is? In Nicolaes Maes' *Old woman in prayer*, we see an elderly woman saying grace for herself at a small table in her modest home with an informal detail of fish, bread and cheese that she is about to eat. Banal details of peeling paint and stains on the wall, along with other trappings of daily life—a kitten claws its way up the table cloth—contribute to a rich view of ordinary life. This is objective reporting in the best journalistic sense. Indeed, what is it about the Dutch sensibility that led a Dutch painter at the time to say, 'We paint with our hands, the Italians paint with their heads'?

If we go back in time, we can see many precedents for this introspection and domestic imagery. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, Albrecht Dürer had already displayed an astonishing self-awareness in his *Melancholia*. He was a friend of Luther and favoured the doctrines of the Reformation. In his depiction of *St Jerome in his study*, the 'domestic' de-

tail, the fascination with external light filtering through the window, is a contemplative simplicity we are to recognize in the Dutch Masters a century later. It was already in place. Similarly, Hans Holbein portrayed this interest in realism. In his *The Ambassadors* of 1533, with its minutely portrayed contemporary navigational, astronomical and musical instruments, there is an obvious interest in practical and material things; the down-to-earth attitude of the Anglo-Saxons and northern Protestants.

It would seem that this 'northern' temperament of sobriety, self-awareness and democratic social consciousness was instrumental in the impetus for the Reformation. The tendency of the Church in the Middle Ages had been to reduce the role of the laity to something like that of a passive consumer, unable to achieve salvation except through participation in rituals controlled, or monopolized, by the central authority of the Church. By the fifteenth century, this was beginning to rub with the wealthier and more educated elements of society. These feelings of resentment were crystallized by Martin Luther. He directly attacked the authority and hierarchy of the Church. He believed, in a profoundly democratic way, that priests should not stand between men and the Bible; in short, that the Pope should not be the sole authority on the scriptures. His was a call for individuals to take responsibility for themselves unmedi-



Nicolaes Maes, *Old woman at prayer*

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ated by priests, authority or the dogmatic scholastic theism taught rigorously in the seminaries of the Catholic Church.

The 'hand' versus the 'head' of the Dutch artist was the essence of this difference between an individual's unmediated perception of the world and the dogmatic interpretation of this world through a mediated religious vision. It was the utilitarian pragmatism of the Protestant world that spawned Bacon, Ockam, Locke and Mill, as against the continental intellectualistic rationalism that spawned Descartes, Leibniz, Schopenhauer and Marx. Max Weber claims that this Protestant impulse was one of the fundamental elements of the spirit of modern capitalism, and also of all modern culture. That is, it was based on individual conduct and severe self-regulation in the world. The Calvinistic Protestant believed his



Jan Steen, *The Leiden Baker*

lot was to add to the glory of God on Earth by consistent achievement in the course of his daily life.

William James expressed it thus: These two systems are what you have to choose between ... [I]f you are the lovers of facts I have supposed you to be, you find the trail of the serpent of rationalism, of intellectualism, over everything that lies on that side of the line. You escape indeed the materialism that goes with the reigning empiricism; but you pay for your escape by losing contact with the concrete parts of life.

It is hard for us to realize just how people thought about the physical world 400 years ago, and just how hard the struggle for a pragmatic, empirical understanding of the world was, and consequently, how revolutionary the Dutch paintings were.

William James explains that the actual universe is a thing wide open, but that a rationalist approach likes systems, and systems must be closed. This is suggestive of the perfection or idealized landscapes that the Italians loved so much, with conceits

such as God's rays shining down from Heaven between perfectly placed clouds, trees and hilltops positioned in a 'just so' universe, which was by its nature 'static, an eternal perfection'. Describing the practical life, James understood that perfection was something far off and still in a process of achievement.

So where did this new pragmatism take Holland? The country soon had refugees arriving from all over Europe, with a variety of Protestant sects setting up their churches, and political and intellectual refugees

of all persuasions finding freedom denied in their own countries. Amsterdam had a population of 100,000, of which no less than 30 per cent were immigrants. It had more newspapers than the rest of Europe put together, its universities were centres of excellence and, of course, painting and literature flourished.

This allowed progressive political thinking. In 1625, Hugo Grotius wrote a treatise on the freedom of the seas, *De Jure Belli ac Pacis*. He argued that each nation was a sovereign power, subject to no higher authority. If a nation saw its vital interests threatened, it had a right to go to war. He also published a plea for toleration in religious matters. By 1630, the magistrates of Leyden were able to write to a group of English dissenters, 'We refuse no honest persons impress to come and have their residence in this city, provided that such persons behave themselves honestly and submit to all the laws'. Was this the first truly modern, open multi-cultural society?

Contrast this mood with Rome in 1633, where the Church set upon

the sick and ageing Galileo on a point of astronomical fact. It was for the Church a matter of not believing your eyes but believing your dogma. This philosophical inheritance from Plato through Thomas Aquinas in mediaeval times—a philosophy which maintained that the world of appearance is illusory and that ideas, forms or universals are the only true realities, belonging to the world of God or mind—was what conditioned the Italian artists who painted with their 'head'.

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This centrally imposed ideological position, reflected in the difference in painting of the time, is at the core of that difference. It is hard to realize that, in this progressive northern European context, the French Revolution was still 150 years away! And when it came, it came with continental rationalist thought; the Cartesian 'I think, therefore I am'. How dangerous that was compared with the pragmatic; 'I am, therefore I look, then tentatively try things out and then I think'. The European Union, the Euro, the Kyoto Protocol, the French 35-hour working week are all products of this Cartesian thinking.

A striking reflection on this thoroughly modern and open society is captured in Jan Steen's *The Leiden baker*. The subject has the relaxed confidence of a self-made man with a freedom of spirit which is a commentary on freedom and the potential of the individual that is so modern that it reaches directly through to us in the twenty-first century.

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