Imag(in)ing prosperity
Painting and material culture in the 17th-century Dutch household

Julie Berger Hochstrasser

When the widow Geertruijt Cornelisdochter passed away in Haarlem sometime in the late 1630s, Jacobus Schout recorded a poignantly brief boedelinventaris of all her worldly goods. Schout was an exceptionally conscientious notary, but this little entry dated 11 January 1638 is in fact so brief as to be almost lost between considerably lengthier listings of the household possessions of Cornelisdochter’s fellow townsfolk. After a few pieces of furniture, Schout’s curt notes record ‘a breakfast painting, another on paper, and eight other small pictures’; the summary of the very simple interior is completed with nothing more than ‘a saltvat of wood and pewter, some earthenware dishes and iron pots’.  

The brief listing is touching in several ways. First, it evokes a household and in turn a life so spare and even austere that it is a far cry from our inherited popular image of the copious and glittering material trappings of the Dutch Golden Age. But more touching still is that among her precious few earthly goods, the widow possessed several objects quite beyond the dishes and pots of meager subsistence: the saltcellar, not just of wood but of wood and pewter, and — still more frivolous — pictures, and not just one or two but ten. This attention to the material culture of a household, especially in one of such limited means, is perhaps as eloquent a testimony as one could imagine to the concept of domesticity the invention of which has been credited to the Dutch of the seventeenth century, and more particularly, to its women. However it is that collected and assembled objects contribute to a sense of home, surely they did so here, transforming an otherwise Spartan space into something more gezellig (cozy, homely), through the luxury (however modest in this case) of decoration.

The presence of pictures in this modest home is consistent with another pervasive image we have inherited from the eyewitness testimony of foreign visitors to the Netherlands during this period, as in the widely quoted remark by Peter Mundy, an Englishman traveling in the United Provinces in 1640:

As For the art off Paintings and the affection off the people to Pictures, I thincke none other goe beyond them [...] All in generall striving to adorne their houses, esp. the outer or street roome, with costly peces, Butchers and bakers not much inferior in their shoppes which are Fairely set Forth, yea many tymes blacksmithes, Coblers, etts., will have some picture or other by

Detail
Jan Davidsz. de Heem, Pronkstilleven with a titmouse, c. 1645, oil on canvas, 140 x 115.5 cm., Centraal Museum, Utrecht, on loan from Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst, The Hague (photo: Centraal Museum, Utrecht).
the Forge and in their stalle, Such is the generall Notion, enclination and delight that these Countrie Natives have to Paintings.4

In fact one might recognize this 'adornment' of pictures as one of the constitutive elements of domesticity in and of itself, together with the other material objects that gradually but notably, in the seventeenth century and in the Netherlands in particular, transformed houses into homes, imbued with the domestic ideal we still value today.

In this context one more surprising feature of the widow Cornelis­dacht’s inventory proves significant. One of her pictures is actually identi­fied by the notary as to its subject: a still life, of the type then described as an ontbijt or breakfast piece – a table laid with a meal, in this case probably a simple one, but yet an image of the very ritual that would have been humbly staged, day in and day out until her death, by the widow herself with her own iron pots and earthenware dishes and saltcellar of wood and pewter. In wealthier inventories with lots of paintings it was common to find each picture described by subject, but smaller listings were typically more summary, so this anomaly provides us with a very rare glimpse into pictorial taste in the simplest of dwellings.

This glimpse is significant as part of a much broader phenomenon. It was precisely in the early years of the seventeenth century that still life painting emerged as an independent genre in the Netherlands, to increase steadily through the decade of the 1660s when the affluence of the country as a whole peaked as well. Scholars have noted this congruence, and commented upon this dialogue between the burgeoning material culture of prosperity and pictures that reflect it. But what has not been ventured is the larger question of agency. Did still life paintings merely, as Bryson formulated it, mirror affluence back upon itself? Or was their role more active within – in fact, active upon – the material evolution of Dutch daily life?

To explore the role and status of pictures in general, and still life in particular, within that larger context of Dutch material culture, household inventories surviving from the seventeenth century offer a wealth of information. Analysis of this data involves some detailed caveats, but yields nonetheless a clearer picture, both on the 'microscopic' anecdotal and on the more 'macroscopic' statistical level, of patterns of ownership across various sectors of society and over time. For a more detailed and comprehensive overview, this study examines extant collections of inventories from Leiden,6 Amsterdam,7 Haarlem,8 and a group of small-town or rural areas, principally Doesburg,9 also referencing statistics and findings from several other projects including Faber’s in Amsterdam,10 Montias’s in Delft,11 De Vries’s in Fries­land and other rural areas,12 and Chong’s from collected sources.13

And it is precisely out of one of these studies that a provocative thesis emerges regarding the role of paintings (especially in this context paintings of material things, or still life) vis a vis material culture (the things such pictures depict). It is only an inadvertent turn of phrase, but as such it is perhaps all the more telling: in summarizing his findings about the development of an upwardly-mobile domestic material culture among the peasants of Friesland, economic historian Jan de Vries suggests that 'they apparently acquired a new vision of the good life'.14 It seems an offhand, almost cliché́d