'For people of fashion'
Domestic imagery and the art market
in the Dutch Republic

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In no small measure seventeenth-century Dutch paintings of the home have come to define our notion of domestic life in the Netherlands during the early modern period. The aura cast by domestic imagery over the viewer today belies the fact that such pictures only began to be produced in significant numbers after a de facto peace was formally ratified with the Spanish at the signing of the Treaty of Münster in 1648. Obviously, the concept of domesticity was not suddenly invented at the conclusion of the war. Many of the familial notions current at that time had actually originated during the preceding century if not earlier. Literature focusing upon the topics of marriage and the family was already in print by the early 1520s, often in the form of published sermons. However, what began initially as a small trickle of publications would culminate in the exhaustive domestic conduct books that appeared towards the end of the sixteenth, and well into the seventeenth century. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the concept of domesticity must have become widespread, pervading all strata of the population. This is confirmed by the existence of literally hundreds of Dutch paintings of domestic themes, although the majority of these postdate 1650. This article investigates the rise of domestic imagery as it supplanted pictorial themes that had been popular earlier in the century. Moreover, it explores how these paintings of domesticity emerged in response to the demands of increasingly affluent buyers who were self-consciously cultivating notions of civility.

To identify the factors that fostered the rise in domestic imagery around mid-century we must turn specifically to the question of the market, that somewhat nebulous term used to describe those persons or groups who purchased works of art in the Dutch Republic. Since artists worked for the market, that is for specific patrons or for an unknown audience on speculation, by necessity they produced their paintings with consideration for the tastes and expectations of their audiences. Despite the objections of some art historians to this line of reasoning, there is ample evidence that artists and art theorists were conscious of the market. Franciscus Junius (1589-1677), for example, pointed out in his De schilderkonst der oude that 'Whoever dares to promise himself the good favor of coming centuries, the same must paint well and fittingly not only according to his own judgement but also to that of
art-savvy connoisseurs’. 6 Philips Angel (ca. 1618-after 1664), in his Lof der schilderkonst, also had prospective buyers in mind when he exhorted painters to impart a ‘decorative richness’ to their works in order to make them more marketable:

How necessary it is for a painter to pay good heed to this can be detected from the stimulating affections it awakens in the breasts of art lovers. One sees this daily in those who enrich their paintings and works with it, drawing the delighted eye of art lovers eagerly to their works, with the result that paintings sell more readily. 7

Junius’s and Angel’s advice may have been ideal but it was undoubtedly followed. Neil de Marchi’s and Hans van Miegroet’s recent, fascinating study of the art trade between Antwerp and Paris in the mid-seventeenth century clearly corroborates this. 8 Specifically, De Marchi and Van Miegroet explored how art dealers in Antwerp, through their Parisian agents, were able to create niches for Flemish pictures in the French capital despite the predominant French taste for Italian art. Even though the painters supplying the pictures in Antwerp were ultimately working on speculation for buyers whom they had never met, they modified their work at the request of the dealers to make it more appealing and marketable.

De Marchi and Van Miegroet discuss one memorable order for pictures submitted in March 1663 by the Paris-based art dealer Jean-Michel Picart to his Antwerp supplier, Matthijs Musson. 9 Picart, a native of Antwerp, requested two major adjustments, both stylistic and thematic, to paintings that would eventually be shipped to him: first, these pictures were to be ‘suyver geschildert’ (cleanly painted), with a high degree of finish – presumably in contrast to what Picart perceived to be the typically Flemish, wet-on-wet application of muddy colors. 10 Picart’s second stipulation concerned subject matter and its representation: he wanted nothing that was potentially frightening or offensive through its vulgarity or crudity. 11 Thus, his order for twelve animal pictures by Jan van Kessel II (1626–79) should not include bats, crocodiles, and the like, but instead innocuous birds and fish. 12 Moreover, Picart specified that Abraham Willemsen (active 1627–72) should adjust the faces of figures in his religious paintings to make them less plump, for fear that they would be too peasant-like and indelicate. 13

The analysis of De Marchi and Van Miegroet, though concerned primarily with art dealers as intermediaries in the market, affords insights into the indirect yet decisive influence of anonymous Parisian audiences upon painters. Certainly, a similar dynamic was at work between artists and audiences in the Netherlands, regardless of whether the latter were anonymous or composed of identifiable patrons. 14 Who specifically were these audiences? In terms of the types of pictures discussed in this article, namely, moderately expensive to exorbitant ones of uncompromisingly high quality, the clients were mostly (though not exclusively) members of the social and cultural elite: the aristocracy, patricians, wealthy merchants and the upper middle-class. 15

These affluent citizens grew even wealthier after the aforementioned Treaty of Münster was ratified in 1648. 16 The treaty finally put an end to