Beginning in the 1640s, a new motif appeared in Dutch painting that would persist in a variety of ways for the rest of the century: the addition of an illusionistically painted curtain over the nominal painted surface of the image. These painted curtains almost always mimic the scale, construction, and appearance of actual curtains that were used to cover paintings at the time. By appropriating a contemporary component of display for artistic practice, artists charged (and blurred) the distinction between the object and its site of display in ways that are highly valuable for exploring the shifting dialogue between illusion and reality in Dutch painting.

Rembrandt’s *Holy Family* in Kassel, signed and dated 1646, is the earliest dated Dutch painting to bear the motif (fig. 1). It depicts Mary sitting by a fire with the infant Jesus while Joseph chops wood in the shadows to the right – a domestic scene without direct scriptural correspondence, but one showing them taking shelter in a ramshackle structure, perhaps on the flight into Egypt. Unfortunately, the panel has been cut down, though a drawn copy on vellum attributed to Nicolaes Maes probably gives a reliable sense of its original appearance (fig. 2). Only in the copy do we see how elaborate and conspicuous the painted gilt frame stands in relation to the curtain and rod attached to it, and the degree to which this display paraphernalia as a whole somewhat detracts our attention away from the subject matter. Rembrandt clearly made a painting of a painting. The contrast between the elaborateness of the frame and the humbleness of the scene it contains is striking. By incorporating a contemporary component of display into the painted field, Rembrandt offered additional rhetorical possibilities to his invention that any actual frame would necessarily obviate.

It has long been recognized that illusionistic curtains must be understood in relation to a famous contest held between the ancient Greek painters Zeuxis and Parrhasius. Several ancient sources mention the competition, with the fullest version coming down to us from Pliny the Elder’s *Natural history*. This work was widely available in a number of editions and translations throughout Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As Pliny relates:

[Parrhasius], it is recorded, entered into a competition with Zeuxis, who produced a picture of grapes so successfully represented that birds flew up to the stage-buildings [in the theater, where the pictures were hung during the contest] whereupon Parrhasius himself