De wonderlijke Perspectyfkas: An Aspect of Seventeenth Century Dutch Painting*

The perspective box was a curious short-lived art form which was the product of artistic and scientific trends current in the Northern Netherlands during the seventeenth century. Crucial for its appearance was, of course, the science of perspective which during the seventeenth century was subjected to intensive scrutiny by both natural philosophers and artists. An unprecedented number of perspective treatises were published which ranged in subject from new perspective procedures to a discussion of the mathematical implications of perspective. In Italy, one important result of this interest in perspective was the development of the illusionistic Baroque ceiling. In France, the accomplishments of Italian illusionism were adapted to French decorative needs. But besides adapting, the French developed interesting perspective experiments themselves, such as the anamorphose. In Holland, the possibilities for perspective decoration were limited. Yet, a scientific and artistic interest in perspective was certainly present, as in the other countries. The Dutch artists, in response to the new interest in perspective—given the limitations for its application and the possibilities of indigenous traditions—developed a completely novel art form: the perspective box.

Although the perspective box may have originated in the city of Haarlem, its development appears to be connected with the Delft school. During the 1650's a new pictorial synthesis of activity and environment was formulated by its members whose foremost representatives during this period were Carel Fabritius and Pieter de Hooch. Their interest in relating figure and milieu is indicative of a major concern of Dutch seventeenth century artists, namely the realistic representation of Netherlandish topography, be it low-lying fields or Dutch towns and homes. These surroundings constituted the backdrop for the conduct of daily life and their clear and accurate depiction was as necessary as the depiction of the activities themselves.

One new way which artists found to represent their milieu in a more convincing manner was the

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1. The boxes are:
1. View of a Reformed church, Nationalmuseum, Copenhagen
2. View of a Catholic church, Nationalmuseum, Copenhagen
4. View of a large room, Museum of Fine Arts, Detroit
5. View of a voorhuis, Nationalmuseum, Copenhagen

The boxes will be referred to in the text by a shortened title and their number in the Appendix.

perspective box. The perspective box, like the doll houses produced in the Northern Netherlands, represented a miniaturization of reality, but whereas the doll house was intended to be no more than that, the perspective box transmuted reality, organizing it according to the then popular compositional schemes, especially those of the Delft artists. Favorite among the devices used by the Delft school was the repoussoir which was adopted by the perspective box painters: four of the six extant boxes employ repoussoirs.

By placing a peephole at eyelevel (of the perspective scheme), the spectator is ‘adjusted’ to the scale of the objects in the perspective box. This device permits the spectator to ‘enter’ the painting. Doll houses, on the other hand, have no shrinking device. The spectator must remain a giant, excluded from the diminutive world of the house.

The possibilities of the perspective box genre seem never to have been fully explored. Perhaps under the guidance of a searching and inventive artist, such as Carel Fabritius, it could have yielded provocative results. The latest preserved example however, is aesthetically dull and certainly would not attract attention were it not for the play element inherent in the perspective box genre.

This paper is divided into two sections, the first deals primarily with the history and structure of perspective boxes as well as with possible emblematic meanings which they might suggest. The second section is a catalogue raisonné of the extant perspective boxes. The fifth item in the catalogue, the Copenhagen View of a voorhuis, is published here for the first time.

The extant perspective boxes were produced during a period of about twenty-five years by a small group of Dutch artists who were primarily specialists of genre and architectural views, and who selected these subjects for their boxes.

4. The iconographic interpretations proposed here are not certain, in fact, some of the perspectives which are interpreted in this paper may simply be genre scenes without emblematic connotations. Cf. Seymour Slive’s excellent article ‘Realism and Symbolism in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting’, Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (Summer, 1962), pp. 469-500, especially 500.

5. The term ‘perspective box’ rather than the popular but anachronistic term ‘peepbox’ will be employed, since the former term was the one used in the seventeenth century by artists who themselves made perspective boxes, see for example Samuel van Hoogstraten, Inleyding tot de Hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst: anders de Zichtbaere Werelt (Rotterdam, 1678), p. 274 where Hoogstraten speaks of a perspectyfkas. According to Neil MacLaren, perspective boxes were first developed in Italy in the fifteenth century and there are examples surviving from the sixteenth century (National Gallery Catalogues: The Dutch School (London, 1960), p. 194). However, these so-called Quattrocento ‘perspective boxes’ were really perspective demonstrations used by Filippo Brunelleschi and Leon Battista Alberti in their attempts to systematically render a pictorial illusion of space. In the course of their experimentation, devices were constructed to demonstrate the theory and method of linear perspective or, what a view, in perspective, looks like. None of these experiments can be classified as perspective boxes of the type discussed in this paper. For Brunelleschi’s devices see Richard Krautheimer (in collaboration with Trude Krautheimer), Lorenzo Ghiberti (Princeton, 1956), pp. 234-240, and for Alberti see William M. Ivins Jr., On the Rationalization of Sight, Metropolitan Museum of Art Papers, No. 8 (New York, 1938). Similarly, the sixteenth century examples are not perspective boxes, but a type of peepshow placed in clock cabinets and produced in the Hainhofer workshop in Augsburg. See Wolfgang Born, ‘Early Peep Shows and the Renaissance Stage’, The Connoisseur, cvi (1941), 67-71, 161-171. These peepshows were miniature stages which depended for their effect upon the combined use of sculpture, painting and mirrors. The subjects were mostly mythological. Another type of peepshow, often depicted in paintings and the graphic arts, was developed at the end of the seventeenth century and employed engraved views and mirrors. See M. v. Rohr, ‘Zur Entwicklung der dunklen Kammer’, Sammlung optische Aufsätze, Heft 6, (1954), 18. Other examples are to be found in an engraving by William Hogarth of 1733 entitled Southwark Fair, and The Peep Show, an etching by Thomas Rowlandson in Outlines of figures, landscape and cattle. A French porcelain group of a girl and boy looking into a charming rococo peepshow exhibited by a young man, dates from ca. 1760 and is preserved in the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, J. P. Morgan collection.