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Mysteries of Dutch Painting

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Reviewed:

The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century
by Svetlana Alpers
University of Chicago Press, 273 pp., $37.50

More than two decades ago Svetlana Alpers placed us all in her debt by publishing a strikingly new analysis of Vasari's famous *Lives of the...Painters* (1550). She taught us (or in any case me) that we misread and therefore undervalue that foundation charter of art-historical studies if we fail to distinguish between what Vasari sees as the means of art and what is its purpose. Far from naively regarding the faithful imitation of nature as an end in itself, Vasari saw the development of representational skills as the perfection of means which always served their main social function —the evocation of a sacred or edifying story, in other words: dramatic narrative.

Confirmation of this important insight can be found in a neglected passage from Leonardo's *Trattato della Pittura*, where the master talks about mechanical means of imitating natural effects (such as the tracing of outlines on the surface of a transparent sheet and observing the shadows and lights). There is nothing wrong, Leonardo avers, if this method is used as an aid, but if artists begin to rely on such shortcuts, "they will always remain poor in inventing and composing narratives which is the aim of that art."

In the challenging book under review Professor Alpers argues convincingly that we are still the heirs of this tradition, which did indeed dominate the teaching of art in the academies of Europe. Thus Sir Joshua Reynolds in his *Discourses* could freely acknowledge what he called the "mechanical excellencies" of the Dutch school while regretting the vulgar use frequently made of such skills. But her argument has a further aim. In her view the historiography of art, including the teaching and writing of art historians today, remains wedded to this conception, which introduced an unconscious bias in favor of Italian art. The methods and attitudes appropriate for the critical evaluation of works in that tradition have proved inadequate to explain other types of art and have therefore led either to their neglect or to their misinterpretation.

Both in her introduction and in an appendix Professor Alpers criticizes in particular the tendency of applying to Dutch painting the methods developed by Erwin Panofsky and others for the interpretation of images conceived in the classical tradition. The search for hidden meanings, the reference to emblem books and enigmatic "hieroglyphs" which has enjoyed a certain vogue among historians of Dutch art, has led, in her opinion, to a fundamental misinterpretation of one of the greatest periods of artistic creativity. In this demonstration she has succeeded triumphantly. There is no doubt that thanks to her highly original book the study of the Dutch masters of the seventeenth century will be thoroughly reformed and rejuvenated.

True, it might have clarified matters if she had talked of the academic rather than of the Italian tradition of art, for she knows very well that not all Italian art is dominated by the values of "history painting." Maybe, in fact, adopting this alternative terminology would also have helped her to diagnose the roots of her dissatisfaction with current art-historical practice. Academics are naturally attracted to the academic outlook, for it encourages an intellectual approach that thrives in the classroom. Like it or not, the teacher of art history must talk, and what lends itself better to such discourse than the demonstration that there is more in any image than "meets the eye"?

Marshaling her evidence from a wide range of disciplines Professor Alpers makes a case for the opposite approach: What matters in Dutch art is precisely what meets the eye. One can only admire the zest and erudition with which she drives home this conclusion. But in a sense her insight must create a problem for her, and for all those who still want to (or have to) talk about Dutch seventeenth-century art. It is a problem of which nineteenth-century writers on art were fully aware.

Eugene Fromentin, in his epochmaking study of the arts of the Netherlands, *Les Maîtres d'autrefois* (1876), begins his account of painting in Holland with a reminder of the surprising fact that there is in Dutch painting "a total absence of what we today call a subject matter...ever since that painting ceased to borrow from Italy her style and her poetics...the great Dutch school seemed to think of nothing but of painting well." The French critic here takes up a theme from Hegel's lectures in aesthetics to which Professor Alpers refers but which she does not quote: "Even though the heart and mind are not given their due, we are reconciled by a closer look... indeed if one wants to know what painting is, one must look at these little pictures to say of this or that master: *he* can paint."

The author, of course, fully appreciates the role which such masterly "crafting" plays in the tradition of Dutch painting, but though she also acknowledges that "northern art does not offer us an easy verbal access" her book is intended to fill that lacuna. As her title indicates she wishes to pit the "art of describing" as practiced in the north against the art of narration developed in the south. "Narration has had its defenders and its explicators but the problem remains how to defend

and define description." The chapters that follow indicate that by "defend" she means assigning to description a social function different from, but equal in relevance to, the religious and moral message of the academic mode.

In pursuit of this aim the author calls as her first witness that renowned Dutch man of letters, Constantijn Huygens, whose well-known autobiography she uses to good purpose. She quotes an interesting passage in which Huygens describes the experience of looking through one of the early microscopes and being reminded of the art of Jacques de Gheyn II who had drawn insects with consummate skill. If only he could have drawn the creatures of that "new world" which the microscope revealed!

Such drawings were in fact made and engraved in the course of the century and added appreciably to scientific knowledge, and yet it could be argued that in stressing this descriptive function of art as typical of a new concern Professor Alpers somewhat overstates her case. What might be called the recording function of the visual image surely did not have to wait for the seventeenth century to be recognized. Several millenniums earlier the ancient Egyptians recorded on the temple wall of Deir elBahari the appearance of plants and animals that an expedition had brought from the land of Punt. It was neither the first nor the last such use of a pictorial record. After all, what are herbals—which existed since classical antiquity—than visual records of medicinal plants for the use of those who have not seen any live specimens?

The author disclaims any intention of wanting to monopolize this function for Dutch art; but any uninitiated reader of her book may still get a somewhat onesided picture of the true situation. Such a reader might find it useful to glance into the hefty catalog of the Florentine Medici exhibition of 1980 devoted to "Commerce, the Rebirth of Science, Publishing and the Occult," which shows the Dutch contribution—great as it was—in its European setting. There is no doubt, of course, that the voyages of discovery and the advent of printing gave a new scope to the image as a conveyor of visual information, and that this presented a challenge to the purely verbal education of classical erudition.

In celebrating this movement, which in more than one respect ushered in the modern age, the author tells us that "art can lead to a new kind of knowledge of the world" or even that "pictures challenged texts as a central way of understanding the world." Not everybody will be inclined to accept this sweeping claim. It is not just hairsplitting to point out that no picture can perform such a feat, when divorced from a caption or other contextual pointers. It is not for nothing that we speak today of "visual aids" when referring to illustrations, diagrams, or films. Nobody would be inclined to underrate the vital role of these aids in supplementing and enriching a verbal account, but the information imparted by images remains embedded in language.

To revert to the wish of Huygens that Jacques de Gheyn could have recorded the new world seen through the microscope, it is clear that any such image without a caption (or its equivalent) could never have imparted "knowledge," let alone "understanding." The creature he drew would have lacked a scale and a context, it might have been a mere grotesque or a fabulous monster from Mandeville's travels. What made the illustrations of microscopic observations so important was the use made of the new knowledge that they incorporated.

This happens to be precisely the point made by Michel Foucault in his book *Les Mots et les choses*, to which Professor Alpers appeals in her interpretation. He points out that the microscope was used in the seventeenth century to solve problems. Take the example of the Italian physician Francesco Redi who, in his book of 1668 (no. 9.45 in the catalog mentioned above), illustrated among other specimens a louse peculiar to donkeys. He thus disproved Aristotle's contention that donkeys do not harbor lice, and apparently incurred the wrath of his contemporaries. But what is this slight contribution to knowledge compared with Redi's conclusion, derived from an examination of the reproductive organs of insects and fortified by experiments, that the universal belief in the spontaneous generation of maggots and vermin in carcasses was untenable, and that all these creatures emerged from eggs laid by files? Here, surely, is a milestone on the road to Pasteur's achievement which could never have come about without the microscope, but never through the microscope alone, or, be it said, through a collection of pictures or specimens, however accurate and however complete. Important as was the art of describing, the art of thinking also needs its defenders.

The author devotes a number of interesting pages to the books by John Amos Comenius, who rightly championed the use of visual aids in education, because he wanted to free children of the empty drudgery of memorizing. His illustrated textbooks should enable the learner to grasp the parts and varieties of trees, etc., while sitting in the classroom, but the role of the captioned picture here is that of a substitute. The teacher could have done even better with the aid of a pointer if the lesson had taken place in a garden; but knowledge acquired through pointing is not yet scientific knowledge.

There is a splendid passage in Swift's *Gulliver* describing the "school of languages" in the grand academy of Lagado, in which he describes

> a scheme for entirely abolishing all words whatsoever;...since words are only names for *things*, it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them such *things* as were necessary to express the particular business they are to discourse on.... The room where company meet who practice this art, is full of all *things* ready at hand, requisite to furnish matter for this kind of artificial converse.

Swift goes on to commend this invention as a "universal language to be understood in all civilized nations."

The butt of Swift's satire, of course, is the Royal Society and its tendency to value the immediacy of observation above the use of words, and indeed it is to this tradition that Alpers refers us in her central chapter. She quotes amply and suggestively from the writings of Francis Bacon whose emphasis on visual observation reminds her of the Dutch "art of description": "Bacon too manifests an intense interest in the minutiae of the world. This is combined with an anonymity or coolness (it is as if no human passions but only the love of truth led him on) that is also characteristic of the Dutch. The world is stilled, as in Dutch paintings, to be subjected to observation."

The passage offers a fine and characteristic example of the author's forensic skill, but it is to be feared that Bacon would have let her down in the witness box. True, she is able to quote him for his dictum "I admit nothing but on the faith of the eyes," but she also knows that he uttered many warnings against reliance on our fallible senses. In fact she is too good a historian to pin the efflorescence of Dutch art on the author of the *New Atlantis*. She writes:

> It will not do, of course, to claim Bacon as a cause for the effect of Dutch painting, in spite of the Dutch enthusiasm for his writings. However, in arguing for craft or human artifacts and their making, Bacon, who lived in a country without any notable tradition of images, can help deepen our understanding of the images produced in Holland, a country notable for its lack of powerful texts.

The question arises whether in yielding to this desire to find "texts" she has not succumbed to the academic temptation she has been trying to banish. Do we need these texts for our understanding? Alpers herself very rightly stresses the continuity of Dutch art, which can be extended as far as the fifteenth century. There is a famous chapter in that classic of cultural history, Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, where the author meditates on the contrast between the miraculous art of Jan van Eyck and the tedious texts composed by his contemporaries. Both, he concludes, pile detail upon detail, but what is tiresome in literature becomes enthralling in painting. Maybe Huizinga exaggerated, but his warning against the search for such identities should not fall into oblivion.

For stressing the relevance of traditions not only implies an attention to the way art feeds on art, it should also make us aware of the cumulative nature of any such skill. What happens in such a hothouse atmosphere is that ambition leads to competition and frequently also to specialization, as it notoriously did in Holland. But if the Dutch masters vied with each other, trying to outdo

their rivals in certain accomplishments, it was hardly the didactic function of the image that drove them on. "Consider the lemon, one of the favored objects of Dutch vision," writes Professor Alpers:

> Its representation characteristically maximizes surface: the peel is sliced and unwound to reveal a glistening interior from which a seed or two is frequently discarded to one side. In the hands of Willem Kalf, particularly, the lemon offers a splendid instance of what I have termed division. The representation of the wrinkled gold of its mottled surface, with the peel here pitted, there swelling, loosened from the flesh and sinuously extended, totally transforms the fruit.

Alpers's own "art of describing" here splendidly matches Kalf's, but while her prose is didactic, Kalf's painting is surely not. We go to her book to learn about Kalf, but not to Kalf to learn about lemons.

It is true that the "sincere hand and faithful eye" that emerged from centuries of cultivation could also be put into the service of a didactic purpose. Here the author's most striking demonstration concerns a print of 1628 after Pieter Saenredam "to belie rumors about the images found in an apple tree." Apparently the dark core of an apple tree which had been cut down near Haarlem was interpreted as a portent since the dark patches resembled images of a Roman priest and thus raised fears among the Protestants that an invasion was threatening them. The print in question carefully copies and explains the portentous black shapes and shows how little they resemble the figures that had been projected into them. Clearly such a demonstration presupposes a developed skill in the faithful rendering of surfaces, which is a "spinoff" of Dutch virtuosity. But is Dutch painting also an offshoot of scientific observation? There are few artistic traditions which equal the arts of the Far East in the minute observation of flowers and birds, but it seems that Japanese culture at any rate was largely devoid of scientific interests. Admittedly the absence of such a parallel elsewhere does not disprove its importance in Holland, but it suggests at least that the autonomy of artistic traditions should never be underrated.

The case is different with the comparison to which the author devotes a special chapter, the relation of geographical maps to Dutch prints and paintings of landscapes and towns. In the period of its greatest commercial expansion Holland was also the principal center of cartography, and the maps and atlases published there set the standard for centuries to come. This remains true and significant even though it might have helped the reader again if she had acknowledged at least in passing that what she calls the "mapping impulse" was not confined to the Dutch. Another catalog of a recent exhibition, this time devoted to Leonardo's astounding achievements in this field (*Leonardo e le vie d'acqua*, Florence, 1983), might serve to adjust the balance since it shows his drawings of Tuscan mountain ranges found in the Madrid codices in connection with the project for regulating the Arno, side by side with striking photographs of these and other areas

he drew and mapped. Not that Professor Alpers needs reminding of Leonardo, but maybe she has forgotten the proliferation of townscapes in Italian decorative murals (such as the courtyard of the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence), not to speak of the Galleria Geographica in the Vatican through which we tend to hurry on our way to the Sistine Chapel. And remembering the Vatican, she should also, perhaps, have made a nod in the direction of Raphael's *Stanza della Segnatura* when formulating her claims for the role of the written word in Dutch paintings.

By themselves these precedents do not, of course, invalidate the important conclusions of this instructive chapter concerning the common frontiers which, in Dutch culture, extend between paintings and maps. But it is not easy to see how this kinship between painting, print-making, and cartography can be reconciled with the thesis of Professor Alpers's second chapter, called "Ut pictura, ita visio," which offers a most stimulating account of Kepler's contributions to the science of optics. It was Kepler, we learn, who first regarded the image formed on the retina as the equivalent of a painting, and this definition, once more, serves the author as an argument for her identification of picturing with seeing and knowing. Leaving aside her extension of the chapter into the much contested field of perspectival theory, I would not want to dispute the relevance of these discoveries to the theory of painting, but of course they cannot have much bearing on the theory of mapping. Maps are made by surveyors who record pointer readings, not retinal images.

But then, do paintings ever record them?

Far from wishing here to mount my old hobbyhorse and canter across the field of my book *Art and Illusion* to which the author pays such generous tribute, I should like to take it into another direction, that of aesthetics. To put it less portentously: Why did and do people enjoy looking at Dutch paintings and cherish the best of them, as Professor Alpers so movingly cherishes Vermeer's masterpieces? Here, obviously, the line of "defense" she has adopted for the "Art of Describing," by pleading its value to knowledge, must seem less than adequate. Indeed, since it was her purpose "to bring into focus the heterogeneous nature of art" that important enterprise might have profited from a further move. Clearly the art of describing can again serve various heterogeneous purposes. Think of a description of London's river in a guidebook as fitting her dominant category and then remember Wordsworth's sonnet "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802," which, famous as it is, still deserves to be quoted and pondered in the present context:

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour, valley, rock, or hill;
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

Disregarding the difference in the time of day and in the mood evoked, I would argue that Vermeer's *View of Delft* can be more effortlessly grouped with Wordsworth's poem than with any guidebook. So much is obvious, but where could we look for an explanation of its poetic rather than prosaic character?

If there is any aspect of art that "does not offer us an easy verbal access" it is surely this transformation of a topographic view into pure poetry. But we need not quite give up all the same. It might be helpful here to recall Constantijn Huygens's wish that Jacques de Gheyn could have recorded the view through a microscope. Helpful, for we might "compare and contrast" this appeal to the prosaic function of the image with another text, written a century earlier. I am thinking of Pietro Aretino's beautiful letter rapturously describing his view of the Grand Canal in Venice during a sunset, which makes him cry out: "Oh Titian, where are you?"

Alas, the marvel Aretino admired has vanished and all we have is his, not Titian's, poetic description.

Today, perhaps a photographer might have preserved the scene for us—as Visconti did in some of his beautiful shots in his film *Death in Venice*. But though photography, the perfect recorder of factual information, is certainly capable also of entering the service of poetic description, its very achievements also make us see why the painting by Titian which Aretino dreamed of could never have been a similar transcript of the scene. De Gheyn might have made a patient drawing of any of the little creatures he saw through the microscope, but for Titian the magic moment would have

gone before he even had put his brush to the canvas. He would have had to compose it from memory with the help of his knowledge of light effects. He would have had to resort to poetic fiction.

Trivial as this observation may sound, I believe it has far-reaching consequences for the "art of describing," because it applies not only to the faithful rendering of a fine sunset but to the representation of any motif under natural conditions.

When we say that a wax model of a lemon is a perfect facsimile of the fruit, all we can mean is that the two may be visually indistinguishable when seen exactly in the same light. The lemon Kalf painted in the still life discussed by the author shows us of course the fruit in a particular illumination; without complicated artifice this illumination could not persist. Even the still-life painter cannot describe what he sees, for what he sees must change every moment. It is the simple fact of what Gibson called "ecological optics" which makes it almost irrelevant to ask whether and when Vermeer used a camera obscura, for the instrument could only have shown him the evanescent aspects of the motif which even the most rapid brushstroke could not have fixed on the canvas. However much he might have been aided in the rendering of outlines, he had no choice but to invent the uniform illumination which pervades his pictures. It must always be a creation rather than a record. But it may also be a fact of ecological optics that we bring to the task of perception an immensely fine tuning to the nuances of ambient light. Without ever knowing why, we will not respond to an arbitrarily contrived illumination as we do to a harmony such as nature might present us.

When Huygens, as quoted by Alpers, says of Dutch artists that they can even represent the warmth of the sun, he hinted at an important truth, but he should really have said that they can *create* the warmth of the sun, as Cuyp mysteriously did. Our sensual and emotional response to light is indeed as mysterious and varied as is our reaction to sounds. We have all known moments in life when light appeared to transfigure a familiar scene and to make us feel what Wordsworth felt on Westminster Bridge. But the great artist cannot and must not wait for such a rare and fugitive spectacle. He has it in his power to transfigure the most commonplace view by the way he imagines and handles the light. Maybe this is the secret of Vermeer, and also, to a lesser extent, of the best paintings by Pieter de Hooch.

In her thought-provoking book the author carves out a niche for Rembrandt, whose art she sees as standing in dialectical opposition to the Dutch vernacular style. Here, as elsewhere, she breaks new ground. Even so, the traditional evaluation of Rembrandt as the master of chiaroscuro might still help to integrate his towering achievement with that of his lesser contemporaries. It is to be

hoped that having so ably completed her defense of one mode of the "art of describing," the author will now turn to the other. She herself has the verve, the knowledge, and the sensitivity to make us see familiar sights in a new light.

Ernst Gombrich

Ernst Gombrich (1909–2001) was an Austrian art historian. Born in Vienna, Gombrich studied at the Theresianum and then at the University of Vienna under Julius von Schlosser. After graduating, he worked as a Research Assistant and collaborator with the museum curator and Freudian analyst Ernst Kris. He joined the Warburg Institute in London as a Research Assistant in 1936 and was named Director in 1959. His major works include *The Story of Art, Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography*, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*.