

Art

# In Praise Of The Dutch

by Hunter Drohojowska

**S**trolling through the exhibition of 17th-century Dutch painting at the L.A. County Museum of Art, I was struck by a peculiar sense of familiarity. As I have never been to Mauritshuis, the Royal Picture Gallery at the Hague, the source of these pictures, I had to stare at a number of them before realizing it wasn't the paintings but the content that was familiar. These are scenes of ordinary life, unremarkable events painted remarkably. The Dutch created the first democratic art, painted by the middle class for the middle class.

Northern Netherlands gained her independence from Spain in 1609. The population was comprised of merchants and tradesmen, and society wasn't ruled by an aristocracy or theocracy. Industrious Protestant burghers decorated their homes with paintings, a novel and unique phenomenon at that time.

The Dutch artists, also from the middle class, trained as craftsmen. They were influenced by their era, the dawn of rational thought and much global exploration and discovery. They began to paint what they observed around them with a fresh candor and an almost scientific accuracy. The landscapes and seascapes, the interiors of churches and domestic scenes, still-lives and portraits, all are pictures of the commonplace and the mundane. It adds up to an interesting social document as much as a lovely exhibition, and therein lies my feeling of familiarity.



*Jan Steen's Girl Eating Oysters from the current LACMA exhibit.*

**T**his country is the inheritor of much that was spawned by the Netherlands of the 1600s. The moral values of any white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant are spelled out here in paintings more than 300 years old. It was a culture that believed in work

and reward, just as we do today. The pictures tell tales of material bounty and human sensuality, of a clean, content, right-living people.

When a collector commissioned a still life, it would be a testimony to his wealth,

ergo his hard work. A table would be laden with fruits, game, wine, delicacies, such as Abraham Beyerens's *Banquet Still Life* of 1655. A lusty sensuality infuses the paintings, especially those of women, who are often portrayed as offering food or drink, playing games or singing. The most common scene will vibrate with an erotic tension. In *Girl Eating Oysters*, Jan Steen depicts a fair maid with a sly, come-hither look, who offers the viewer this explicitly aphrodisiac food. Even in Paulus Potter's *Cow Reflected in the Water*, a bucolic landscape, a cow's swollen udder with pink nipples is mirrored in the stream in great detail, while in the background nudes are bathing, and in one corner a fieldhand is flirting with a milkmaid. The references to human sexuality are subtle but rife. These are paintings of a secular world rather than religious or historical allegory. However, the renderings of plenty and pleasure are accompanied by symbolic exhortations to caution.

In a still life such as Beyerens's, there are warnings that were widely understood. The open watch on the edge of the table, the peel unfurling from the lemon — these are reminders of the very transitory nature of the material world. Seduction is temporal and only the spirit endures. This pervasive concept was conveyed quite literally in the painting *Vanitas Still Life* by Pieter Claesz, which features a skull, a smoldering wick, an overturned glass and the open watch. The work declares that it's "vain" to be overly preoccupied with this material world.

Having looked over these works, I noticed how little our lives seem to have changed during 300 years — we still work hard and revel in the rewards — except

for this concept of vanity. As you leaf through this paper, you'll notice a collection of ads for physical fitness centers, beauty shops, cellulite and appetite control centers, clothing stores, all touting the benefits of physical beauty. But where do you find a caveat against vanity? Today vanity is protection against an inhospitable culture. Appearances are a form of armor, life preservers that keep us from sinking into the sea of insecurity. We may not be sure of much in our present confusion, but at least we have physical beauty in the here and now. We feel good feeling vain, and we reward it in others. John Travolta is staying alive because of it. Paradoxically, the word "vain" derives from the Latin root "vanus," which means empty.

We've come to associate vanity with beauty and pride in a positive way. But there is a painting in the exhibition that defeats such an argument. Johannes Vermeer's *Head of a Young Girl* is one of the most exquisite paintings in the world, and that is not hyperbole. The beauty is so consuming that it breaks down the barrier between viewer and art, building an unparalleled intimacy. The girl's look is inviting, though distant, her parted lips are promisingly erotic, yet chaste. As historian Edward Snow points out, she is not hiding behind her expression, she is her expression. She is neither self-conscious nor vain, yet her candid glance will stay with you for years. It's an enduring spell. To learn your own lessons from the past, Dutch Painting of the Golden Age will be on view through Sept. 11. ■