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The Division of Art: Specialization and the Dutch

There are many things which make the Golden Age of Dutch Art fascinating to both art historians and casual museum visitors. This massive influx of artistic development did not manifest itself out of thin air. During the seventeenth century the Netherlands were going through a massive political, economic, and social upheaval. They had recently been victorious in a rebellion against their Spanish rulers. They established one of the first Republics in Modern Europe, developed an economic system which some would call the prototype of capitalism, and opened up a wide range of social mobility for many. The vast artistic community was only one of the many changes that the Dutch were going through at that time and was in fact a product of the socio-economic environment. This caused Dutch art to exhibit certain qualities that weren't present before, and that we may in fact take for granted today. Namely, that artists exhibited the economic phenomenon of the division of labor between different styles of art. This unique quality allows us to look at specific artists and what they specialized in, in order to focus on certain aspects of Dutch society. It also gives us the

name of the exhibition, a play on words, The Division of Art: Specialization and the Dutch.

The exhibition would open with a short informational section that explains the historical context of the creation of the First Dutch Republic, and then describes the economic implications of specialization. Specialization occurs because of a principle called comparative advantage in which one individual may be able to produce a greater quantity of goods if they choose to focus their time on producing one type of good of which they are skilled at, and then to later trade for the variety of goods which they would like to consume. This leads to both more goods being produced overall, and often higher quality goods as each individual is able to hone their craft. Being an artist at all is one form of specialization, but the Dutch further divided their labor into producing certain types of art such as, landscape, portraits, and genre paintings. "It has been hypothesized that the "surprising development of specialties around 1600 stemmed partly from the division of labour practiced in the big Antwerp workshops earlier in the 16th century."⁴ Another factor that contributed to the ability to specialize is the increasing ability to which artists were able to paint on spec. This means that they would not paint according to the explicit instructions of their buyer, but that they would paint many pieces in their own specialized field for people to buy later. This ability came along with the changing economic and social structure of the Netherlands.

With artists specializing in largely one field, we are able to analyze the way in which they portrayed their aspect of Dutch culture to a fine-tuned point. Specialization not only gave the artists increased economic power, but also provided us with a historical lens with which to have a more focused view on an area. It also allows to analyze the formal art styles of each piece by the variable of their type, especially since these are done by masters of their respective types. Each piece in the exhibit is by an artist who specialized in that field. First is landscape pieces featuring Aelbert Cuyp's *River Landscape with Cows*. Second is portrait pieces featuring Rembrandt's *A Polish Nobleman*. Third is genre pieces featuring Johannes Vermeer's *Girl with a Red Hat*.

Landscape

The most prominent piece in the landscape section is one by a landscape painter named Aelbert Cuyp. He originally apprenticed under his father who was a prominent portrait painter by painting the landscape backgrounds to his father's portrait pieces. He continued his work with landscapes far into his own career.¹ This piece is titled *River Landscape with Cows*. It is 60 by 92.8 cms and is done with oil on canvas. It portrays a field and a hill overlooking a river populated by a few sailboats. In the foreground are a herd of resting cattle with who are presumably their owners slightly behind overlooking the river. The herd immediately draws the eyes of the viewer, but then they may feel free to look farther back into piece and take in the vastness of the lands beyond. The colors remain somewhat shaded however still lively. There are beams of light that break through the fog, and accent the foreground figures in all their

detail. Aside from the cattle most of the brushstrokes and lines in painting are billowy and wavy, also emphasizing the cattle as our primary figures. Additionally, scale is used to make the cows far larger than any other object in the painting save the clouds.

During this time, the cow was used as a symbol of the prosperous times that the Dutch were undergoing.² Landscape paintings often were used to portray this new prosperity, and therefore were in high demand.

Portraits

Perhaps the most well known Dutch artist of all-time, Rembrandt van Rijn, was a specialist in portraits. His reputation as a portrait painter grew as result of his ability to convey emotion and expression through a contrast of light and dark.³ The portrait on display in this exhibition that represents this ability is titled *A Polish Nobleman*. It is 96.8 x 66 cm and is done with oil on canvas. It features a perhaps slightly melancholy man with a billowy Slavic hat, a large crimson fur coat, a large gold necklace, and sceptre. However, what immediately draws the viewer in is the direct and piercing stare of the nobleman. A majority of the figure appears shrouded in darkness, but color and light is used to emphasize aspects of the figure. For example, the man's face shines much brighter than the rest of the painting, but his eyes and nose are much darker, a pattern that can be seen in Rembrandt's own self-portraits, making the whole painting seem to be a bullseye that centers around the nobleman's nose. The only other objects that stand out using the color are the man's jewelry. Since according to the title this man is Polish, perhaps Rembrandt is trying to emphasize the exoticness of this man

while maintaining the portrait styles that make him great. The clothes and jewelry are merely the unique variation that is put on this version of Rembrandt's portrait which is created over and over again as is with specialization.

Genre Paintings

Vermeer was not only known for genre paintings, but he was certainly one of the prominent that specialized in them. In this exhibit is *Girl with a Red Hat*. It is very small being only 22.8 x 18 cm and done with oil on panel. It features a young girl with a large red hat turning to look back over her shoulder at the viewer while seated. There are no clear or obvious lines and brushstrokes, pulling the viewer into the painting and making the painting almost interactive as if you could easily talk to this girl. A majority of the painting is dominated by the girl's face and her large red hat. The viewer feels compelled to look directly at the girl in the picture as if to look away would be rude. The colors of the hat and the contrast of light on both sides of her face call out, demanding attention. Vermeer often painted women in this position, that is looking over their shoulder, in other famous paintings of his such as *Girl with a Flute* and *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. This visual motif is likely an additional outcome of the benefits from specialization. If Vermeer had been asked to paint all different sorts of figures as opposed to choosing what he could specialize in, he would not be nearly as practiced. The freedom to specialize allowed artists like Vermeer to work with their own talents in such a way as to maximize their ability to a peak.

Specialization supported the Golden Age of Dutch art for two main reasons. Mainly, the economic efficiency it provided allowed artists to produce much greater quantities. However, the second reason is that when someone specializes in their craft, they gain both skill and notoriety for it. This allowed artists like the ones featured in this exhibit to know the ins and outs of how to paint a specific type of painting. It also granted them the additional ability to brand themselves. For example, if Rembrandt had never specialized in portraits, a “Rembrandt Portrait” would not be notably distinguishable from any other Rembrandt piece both today and in Rembrandt’s age. The vast quantity benefits us in retrospect in order to compare and contrast large amounts of artworks from the same person with a similar focus to really be able to get an idea of how they thought when they worked.

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