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HNRS 122

10/4/16

The Obstacle of Time in Analyzing Painters and their Audiences

A primary obstacle in analyzing art from the past is trying to understand how various artists were trying to communicate with their contemporary audiences. Art historians can easily analyze a piece of art directly, but have no way of viewing it through someone else's eyes much less those of someone viewing the same piece three hundred years ago. This difficulty can lead to disagreements between art historians on the intentions of artists. One such disagreement is regarding the iconological approach to interpreting seventeenth century Dutch paintings. This was initially theorized by art historians like Eddy De Jongh who used emblem books like Roemer Visscher's *Sinnepoppen* (Emblems) as evidence that the Dutch were notably infatuated with emblems and iconography. "We meet the results of the addiction in literature and in the visual arts, it's symbolic form being either traditional or unconventional." (De Jongh 130) De Jongh, while using this approach, discovers many instances that emblems were used in seventeenth century Dutch Artwork. Other historians however disagree with some of his conclusions of how the Dutch viewed art. Eric Sluijter in his own essay criticizes supporters of the iconography theory's lack of evidence, and elaborates on other possible views of the Dutch vision of art. The incessant debates between art historians warrants a further inquiry. Are art historians more inclined to argue, or is there something that makes studying art inherently divisive? The former seems unlikely so in this essay I will try to answer the latter question by continuing to analyze both the arguments of De Jongh and Sluijter. Both De Jongh's initial formulation of a theory and Sluijter's analysis and subsequent proposals provide both an example of how an art historian uses primary source

evidence to create an idea of what it would have been like to art consumers in another artistic period and how easily that evidence may be refuted.

De Jongh's central theory is that the Dutch use of iconography is an outgrowth of the Dutch infatuation with the deeper meaning behind symbols. Intuitively this is a good thesis, as symbols are an accessible part of the general knowledge that an artist can capitalize on to draw an audience. Many of the symbols that De Jongh repeatedly mentions are used in still lifes. Still life provides the opportunity for an artist to include multiple stationary symbols in an environment that is instantly recognizable such as a dinner table or a work desk. A particular style of still life that uses many symbols is the vanitas style. Vanitas uses skulls, stopwatches, and various other icons of time to evoke thoughts of mortality and death. An example piece that De Jongh uses is Christoffel van den Berghe's, *Vanitas with a vase of flowers*. De Jongh makes the point that in this painting the skull is used as a categorizing symbol for the other symbols in the piece. In different contexts the vase of flowers may mean love or beauty, but next to the skull the viewer is being told to focus on the symbolism of their withering nature. He uses most of his essay to apply this kind of analysis and his iconographical method to many other pieces.

At the beginning of his essay De Jongh mentions that much of the contemporary literature supports that the Dutch believed objects to have inherent meanings behind them. He then uses this evidence to support his theory and continues to gather more evidence by then applying his theory to piece after piece. The primary sources are crucial to his argument, because an artist's intentions are often dependent on the attitude, beliefs, and values of their contemporary viewers. Artists rarely specifically create works to be timeless. They will not ignore stylistic choices that are dependent on the fleeting nature of their own dynamic culture. Because of this, a non artistic piece of evidence such as the emblem book is necessary to backup his claims of what part of contemporary knowledge the artist was aiming at in creating his piece.

Sluijter near the beginning of his piece states that the iconographic view is not incorrect, but has severe limitations. He elaborates by saying that if the emblematic approach is the only way used to analyze a piece then the viewer ends up with a few words devoid of motion and sometimes of empty application. "As a result, a non-narrative art, which for the most part appears to be devoid of any relationship to textual references, has nevertheless been joined to texts. This has led to such far-reaching conclusions as the following: "The joyful, often coarse domestic and tavern scenes have been convincingly established as instructive lessons, warning against sin, recalling death, challenging the viewer to lead a God-fearing life." (Sluijter 78) Looking from the artist's point of view, if all one needs is emblems to communicate to their audience why not write in only basic symbols. Hieroglyphics were certainly effective, and may be a good example of art that can be looked at purely using the iconographical lens. Sluijter's critique rests on his claim that the iconographical approach divides "form and content". By claiming that there is meaning only in the symbols and those being the real content, the form is devoid of meaning and useless. He claims that the iconographical view was borrowing from literary approaches of earlier centuries, and ignores the vast amounts of change that Europe, and especially the Dutch went through in the seventeenth century.

Sluijter uses a specific piece of primary source documentation. A particle text by Philip Angel, *Lof der Schilder konst* (In Praise of Painting) is a good look into how painters were thought of in that particular period in time. The text includes a poem by Jacob Cats that pits men of many different professions in the ring vying for the same girl. In the poem, they try to woo her by proving that their talent or skill is the best to have in a husband. The painter in the poem talks in incredibly practical terms in contrast to the poet who talks very philosophically. The practical painter whom we can assume was written to reflect their popular image of a painter is at odds with de Jongh's view of the painter who tries to moralize through symbols. Sluijter includes this to draw de Jongh closer to reality. De Jongh's assertions are based on a few literary sources of the time that the Dutch were highly interested in the

use of symbols, but Sluijter's piece being a critique, only needs to disprove de Jongh. All the evidence that he needed was to show that the iconographical approach neither held up to artistic theory by explaining the form and content gap, and used a primary source to provide alternate possibilities for how painter's were viewed at the time.

Though De Jongh does clearly articulate and provide interesting evidence of his theory, Sluijter's piece shows some major flaws with the notion that iconography is the new litmus test for Dutch Art. What's interesting about Sluijter however that makes him more convincing is that he does not replace the iconographical lens with his own. De Jongh believes that he has discovered the way to leap over the obstacle that time creates between modern critics and the contemporary viewers through iconography, but Sluijter has shown that he vastly underestimated the height of that obstacle. By not claiming a particular alternative to De Jongh's approach Sluijter left open the many possible and possibly multiple explanations to how painters were viewed in the seventeenth century. All that Sluijter points out is that many things changed in the economy and politics of the Netherlands between the sixteenth and seventeenth century that would most certainly have had an effect on the painters of the time. Since art history is very reliant on context some of the facts that may be crucial to the understanding of exactly why the art scene was the way it was at a certain time may be elusive.

Ultimately, De Jongh and Sluijter are part of a grander cycle. The iconographical approach has a lot of merit to it, but clearly does not have enough backing it to be dubbed the Official Theory of Dutch Art. It is unlikely that any historian will ever discover such a theory, and because of this the best that can be done is to undergo many reiterations of a cycle to improve upon the theories that are already out there. When a theory like De Jongh's comes along there will always be a Sluijter to give it a second look. One person cannot hold enough contextual information at one time to be able to come up with a foolproof lens. There are so many factors that go into the production and consumption of art that it is impossible to know them all at once in a way that can be analyzed. Furthermore, as before mentioned,

the gap of time is constantly eroding away at the ability to even find these factors. This I believe provides a sufficient answer to the question which I posed at the beginning. Does art history inherently lead to debate? What is shown in these examples is that art is clearly context dependent and that history is clearly evidence and primary source dependent. Because of these two self-evident truths no final answer can realistically be discovered in art history, and divisiveness, debate, and disagreement are the best tools that we have to get closer to that unattainable final answer.

Works Cited

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