

Summary

Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting in Polish Literature after 1918

The book is a thorough study of reception of seventeenth-century Dutch painting in Polish literature after the Second World War. The first part develops a monographic discussion of the issue, whereas the second part is a reconstruction (based on manuscripts, typescripts, and notes) of an unfinished collection of essays by Zbigniew Herbert on the so called Dutch minor masters.

The structure of the first part, titled *The Writers as an Art Historian*, has been based on genre classification, and refers to the nineteenth-century vision of typical Dutch genres: THE LANDSCAPE, GENRE PAINTING, STILL LIFE, AND PORTRAIT. This way of thinking has been copied by Polish writing, who focus, in their writings, on the landscape, genre painting, still life, and portrait (including individual ones, groups, and self-portraits).

Albert Blankert, in the introduction to the catalogue of *Gods, Saints and Heroes. Dutch Painting in the Age of Rembrandt*, points out to the domination, in collective consciousness, of a nineteenth-century realistic vision of Dutch painting as a true reflection of reality. According to Blankert, it was the French critics who were responsible for this stereotypical perception of the Dutch school: Théophile Thoré and Eugène Fromentin, as well as the Dutch historian, Johan Huizinga, whose views were strongly influenced by the nineteenth-century paradigm of thinking about Dutch culture. Blankert attempts to prove that seventeenth-century Dutch historical painting was mistakenly marginalized, because it defied nineteenth-century aesthetic theories.

Jan Białostocki is of a similar opinion, when he stresses that, thanks to art historians late in the nineteenth-century, a consistent process of re-evaluation of the one-dimensional, nineteenth-century interpretation of seventeenth-century Dutch painting has begun, a process that was particularly furthered by the aforementioned exhibition, *Gods, Saints and Heroes. Dutch Painting in the Age of Rembrandt*. However, this approach is most visible in specialized discussions by researchers. The general opinion was persistently dominated by the vision, created by the French and

developed and strengthened by Huizinga, of a “de-heroized” Golden Age of Dutch painting.

The Polish writers can be perceived as continuers of the peculiarly anachronistic way of thinking about the Dutch Golden Age. This is primarily because of their common reading experience. The aesthetic opinions of Tadeusz Makowski, Jan Cybis, Józef Czapski, Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, Zbigniew Herbert, to mention just a few protagonists of this book, has been shaped under the influence of Delacroix’s *Journals*, Balzac’s work, Thore’s *Musées de la Hollande*, as well as his numerous dissertations and essays on art, by Fromentine’s *Old Masters*, Taine’s *Philosophy of Art*, or, in the twentieth-century, by Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Because of these readings, it is possible to detect a particular style of reception of art in the essays and poems by Polish authors, a style that is described here as MEDIATED RECEPTION. To represent the phenomenon of the painting of Northern Netherlands, the authors use nineteenth-century categories, such as realism of genre painting, and the Dutch Golden Age painting seems to be, in their writings, a secularized art that brings on a praise of everyday life.

The present discussion of Dutch seventeenth-century painting begins with the landscape, which is one of the most recognizable genres of the time. The discussion attempts to prove that the statements about the realism of the paintings, copied by Polish authors, are rooted in Fromentine’s concept of Northern landscape which, as the critic claimed, was a “portrait of the Netherlands”. A visible trace of this reading the confrontation of “landscapes in frames” with the real face of the country in the Netherlands. The practice, favoured by Makowski and Herbert, is a repetition of the attempts by the traveling authors of the nineteenth-century. On the other hand, the theorists of the seventeenth-century promoted a different concept of seeing and representation of nature, because the landscapes were not painted in nature; they were painted in artists’ studios. The artistic vision of homeland landscape was born in a painter’s imagination. The topographic inconsistencies, which Herbert attempted to trace down (as he literally tried to confront the painting with what was painted), were nothing but compositional techniques. Art historian talk, in this case, of “the concept of selective naturalness” or “naturalness of effect”.

Subsequently, the discussion shifts to painting techniques of Dutch masters, especially as discussed by Polish painters writing about art (Cybis, Pankiewicz, Czapski, Makowski), who focused on the issues of color and brightness. They were inspired by the technique of seventeenth-century masters, by their operation with color and tone. Another source of mediation was Fromentine’s thought, who thought that the “truth of

brightness” amplified the realism of representation. Last but not least, the texts was substantially influenced by the techniques of the Polish painters, for whom the meaning of color was a central issue in their work.

Vermeer’s *View of Delft* is a particular case of seventeenth-century Dutch landscape, which serves as the context for the problem of realism in representation, painting from nature, and the mood of operation with color, as well as luministic effects (which brings in anachronistic associations with impressionism). For this painting, the discussion of mediation does not focus on impressionists, who wanted to appropriate Vermeer as their predecessor (a statement that was attractive also for some art historians who proved that Vermeer painted his masterpiece from nature), but on Proust’s *petit pan de mur jaune*. Pointing to twentieth-century analyses of the painting, which represent various methodological approaches (Wheelock and Kaldenbach, Ziemba, Swillens, Alpers, or Didi-Huberman), the present discussion juxtaposes various interpretative concepts, searching for a formula that would be close to the vision of Polish authors.

The book confronts three interpretations: Czapski’s, Grudziński’s, and Herbert’s, which are three separate (or even contradictory) proposals for a reading of *View of Delft*. Bearing in mind the differences, the discussion demonstrates that the three authors search for a metaphysical rationale of Vermeer’s masterpiece. Interpreting *View of Delft* through Proust (Czapski and Herbert were fascinated by Bergotte’s vision of the painting, whereas Grudziński was clearly irritated by the attempt to reduce the genius of Vermeer’s painting to “little patch of yellow wall”), the Polish authors are strongly embedded in the network of cultural references. The analysis points out to the intertextual sources of the three Polish interpretations of the masterpiece, demonstrating that it has become impossible to talk about *View of Delft* without mentioning Proust’s *petit pan de mur jaune*.

The next chapter is a discussion of genre painting, which the Polish authors reach also through nineteenth-century interpretations. Detailed representations of interiors of Dutch houses, and genre scenes from everyday life, were direct inspirations, for instance, for Balzac as the author of realist novels. Ruth Bernard Yeazell demonstrates that detailed-ness of Balzac’s descriptions of middle-class household life, is rooted in the Dutch tradition. Thoré, in the second volume of *Musées de la Hollande*, compared the “meticulous description of topography of places” in Balzac’s novels to De Hooch’s paintings representing house interiors, creating an idealized (and ideologized) vision of middle-class quiet life, an all-encompassing harmony based on a painter’s representations of house interior.

Contemporary researchers (Martha Hollander, Victor Stoichita), on the other hand, demonstrate that the “view through” (*doorsien*), created by Dutch interior painters, becomes an invitation for the eye, an opening for a game with the viewer. The painting of a seventeenth-century Dutch interior should be read, Stoichita asserts, as a metaphor of the open door. The painterly construction of illusionist representation is a gesture addressed to the viewer, who is supposed to answer it, and thus “enter” the neat, seemingly real middle-class life. This challenge, made by Pieter de Hooch or Samuel van Hoogstraten, was accepted by Polish authors, such as Tadeusz Różewicz, Jarosław Klejnocki, or Wojciech Wencel.

In the essay *Pery Vermeera (Vermeer’s Pearls)* Gustaw Herling-Grudziński points out to an important difference between Vermeer’s genre scenes in interiors of middle-class houses and similar paintings by other Dutch artists. Underscoring Vermeer’s separateness, the writer demonstrates that Vermeer, unlike other genre painters, focuses above all on the human figures he represents. Based on the analysis of texts relating to several masterpieces by Vermeer (such as *Girl Reading Letter at the Open Window*, *The Milkmaid*, and *The Lacemaker*) the present author tries to demonstrate that even Vermeer’s representations of women focused on a work (such as *The Milkmaid*) can be perceived, as Perry Chapman claims, as personifications of an abstract idea, or, according to Wayne Franits, as “images of domestic virtue”. On the other hand, Polish authors, who assume a modern interpretative perspective, concentrate on the fact that the figures in the paintings are individuated, subjectified, and authentic. This is because Vermeer abandoned the objectifying mode of representation and showed emotions on the faces of his heroines.

The present book demonstrates that on many occasions the seventeenth-century theory of reception of an art work cannot be collated with a modernist pattern of interpretation. This is why the author looks for other sources of mediation for the Polish readings of Dutch art, as Polish texts on seventeenth-century painting seem to be a cultural construct that has been strongly fortified by various, historically and ideologically motivated interpretations.

Polish authors were also fascinated by Dutch still life. Reflection on this painting genre leads them, as in the interpretation of *View of Delft*, to a statement on “metaphysicality” of being and art. In the context of literary discussions of still life, three historical and terminological issues are frequently repeated, and seem to be fundamental: the genesis of still life as genre, the question of the term itself (still life and *nature morte*), and of

the paradox embedded in it, and the questions of the place of still life in the classical hierarchy of genres.

Czapski searches for ancient roots of still life, and refers to seventeenth-century theorists, whereas the essence of the “dead nature” (as he uses the customary Polish term), he reaches through Cézanne. The Dutch still life of the seventeenth-century, for Czapski, seems to be a painterly expression of contemplation of nature, understood in Cézanne’s manner, borne out of unceasing study of it. Thus, it is not an abstract idea that becomes the foundation of a creative act. The painterly experience, according to Czapski, is not possible without a previous experience of reality.

An almost identical network of mediations was constructed by Miłosz, who makes similar statements on contemplation of nature and the need for directing art towards reality (even though he is conscious of the linguistic turn). In *Wypisy z ksiąg użytecznych* (*Excerpts from Useful Books*) the poet has included a chapter called *Kłopoty z opisem rzeczy* (*Problems with Description of Things*) and, in the introduction to the chapter, he juxtaposed Dutch still lifes, Cézanne’s and Chardin’s paintings, as well as Mickiewicz’s *Pan Tadeusz*. An important autobiographical theme in Miłosz’s work was his family manor in Szetejnie, which he associates with Dutch painting. Miłosz explains that “entering” the world of his memories is tantamount to entering the Golden Age of Dutch painting. In his reflections he demonstrates that still life is a praise of the world of things, and that transcendence of their physicality, underscoring what is beyond it, gives objects a metaphysical dimension.

In the case of literary interpretations of the Dutch portrait, the question of subjectivity moves to the foreground. In the present book, the problem is discussed on the example of two poems published in the 1960s, and referring to the greatest Dutch portrait painters, Hals and Rembrandt. The first poem is *Frans Hals* by Tadeusz Różewicz, and the second, *Lekcja anatomii (Rembrandta)* (*The Anatomy Lesson by Rembrandt*) by Stanisław Grochowiak. In the poetical reflection on seventeenth-century Dutch portrait, there is a radical reformulation of old modes of perception of this kind of painting. Even if the two poets tried to reconstruct the historical context related to the biographical legend of the artist (Różewicz), or the rules of an anatomy spectacle (Grochowiak), they did not focus on what was most important for Rembrandt’s contemporary viewers, which was who was shown in an individual or group portrait. The basic point of reference, for Polish poets, are the modern views of subjectivity (Różewicz) or the problem of carnality and objectification (Grochowiak). The poets ask

questions that are not about art, but about a human being, or more precisely, how a human being is treated in art.

The first section of the present book is closed by a discussion of the Polish literary reception of Rembrandt's self-portraits. The section addresses the problem of writers' struggle against the nineteenth-century vision of Rembrandt as an artist who consciously and consistently analyzed his own "I" in a series of self-portraits (the statement known, among others, from Henryk Elzenberg and Joanna Guze). In this context, the present book interprets Tadeusz Różewicz's *Zwierciadło* (*The Looking Glass*), where the poet refers to the famous *Self-Portrait as Zeuxis*. The book also "reconstructs" the discussion between Gustaw Herling-Grudziński and Svetlana Alpers, about the theatricality of Rembrandt's self-portraits.

The confrontation between literary and scientific discourse leads to more general conclusions, because it turns out that whereas art historians demonstrate how self-portraits are an expression of Rembrandt's self-consciousness as an artist, the Polish authors promote interpretations in which Rembrandt, self-conscious as a human being, reaches the essence of his own self. For critics who investigate the Dutch painter's art, the seventeenth-century context is the most important one, whereas the literary authors concentrate on the universal question of struggle between a human being and the passage of time. Art historians see, in Rembrandt's mirror, an artist who consistently shapes his image, whereas literary authors notice, above all, the human features of the painter.

The second section of the book is entitled *Zbigniew Herbert's "Dutch Minor Masters" – An Attempt at Reconstruction*. This section was developed through archive research in Zbigniew Herbert's papers at the National Library in Warsaw. Reading the typescripts and manuscripts of the unfinished collection about the so called Dutch minor masters, the present author made an attempt at reconstruction of the genesis of Herbert's text. Based on the poet's notes, the present author tried to establish Herbert's sources when he was working on the essay collection. Even though Herbert usually did not provide bibliographical data for his sources, it was still possible to establish the sources of his references and quotations.

This section is not only an attempt at reconstruction of the collection (which is consequently discussed as a peculiar "work in progress"), a reconstruction with an apparatus based on editorial and bibliographical research, but also a proposed interpretation of Herbert's *Mali mistrzowie* (*Minor Masters*). The section is also envisaged as a thematic completion of the first section, or a sort of counterweight to it. This is because the first section, focused on Polish literary reception of Dutch painting, usually

referred to the “great” painters: Vermeer, Rembrandt, Hals, or to “typically Dutch” landscapes and interiors, or to the famous still lifes and portraits. The second part, on the other hand, features the “marginalized” painters: Willem Duyster, Pieter de Hooch, Hendrick Avercamp, Hercules Segers, and Pieter Saenredam.

The works by Duyster, who was described by Rosenberg, Slive, and Ter Kuile as someone who “was never put to the test,” Herbert describes as his great discovery. The essay on Duyster is an attempt at restoring the fame of an artist who specialized in depictions of merry soldiers indulging in life’s pleasures, or scenes from middle-class life ridden by, as the poet anachronistically puts it, by “Proustian melancholy”. A substantial part of the essay would contain a description of the *Wedding Party* displayed in Amsterdam. In the ekphrasis, which Herbert re-edited many times, there are numerous inconsistencies. The poet confronts, based on “eye’s memory,” two visits to the Rijksmuseum. Herbert viewed Duyster’s work, as the present author managed to establish, first before, and then after its renovation, conducted in the years 1972–1975, when numerous *pentimenti* were removed. The poet, who was not conscious of the alterations, creates a peculiar ekphrastic contamination, introducing, in his description, the remembered elements of the painting before and after reconstruction.

Another artist, who also specialized in genre scenes, was Pieter de Hooch, whom Herbert described as the “poet of the home”. His paintings, which show seventeenth-century middle-class interiors in incredibly great detail, are treated by Herbert as a document of the age, and the painter himself is described as a guide through the interiors. The poet, in his envisaged essay, wanted to imply that De Hooch’s painterly vision of home life was a closed, complete project, whose poetic quality consists in the harmony of precisely represented interiors and the idyllic scenes of everyday life inscribed in them.

With Hendrick Avercamp, the poet ventures into the world of seventeenth-century winter landscapes. Herbert compares his paintings with those by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. He also asks whether or not the affliction of the “Mute of Kampen,” as the artist was described, determined his work. Herbert also tries to analyse the painter’s work in the context of the category of naiveness. He returns to the three interlaced themes: Francesco da Hollanda’s opinion, from *The Four Dialogues on Painting*, about Flemish painting, the concept of naiveness created by Friedrich Schiller, and the work by naive painters, heirs to the artistic idiom of Henri Rousseau. The fundamental value of Avercamp’s work, as determined by Herbert, turns out

to be not his painterly technique, but a sympathetic, naively old-fashioned relation to reality.

Hercules Segers, whom Herbert calls (after Charles Sterling) “the last visionary of the mountains in the Netherlands,” was discovered by the poet at the Gallery Uffizi in Florence. Many notes on technical experiments, the innovative use of painterly techniques in printmaking, or the influence of Segers’s peculiar idiom on Rembrandt’s work, testify that Herbert read scientific works on Segers. The poet, however, also trusts in psychological interpretations of Segers’s unusual technique, which leads to brilliant, if unconvincing, hypotheses. The essay on Segers was probably intended as a story, which exemplifies the poetic nature of the author and his way of viewing art works.

Pieter Saeneddam is represented, by Herbert, as an unusually hard-working and precise “portrayer of architecture”. Herbert, like the academic experts in Saeneddam’s work, isolates three stages of work in the painter’s artistic procedure: the “sketch from nature,” and “constructivist” phase, and the point of arrival, which is an oil painting. Comparing the effects of the three phases of artistic process, the poet states that the “core of art” of the Haarlem artist is an oil painting; Herbert diminishes the importance of preparatory work. Herbert planned to turn Saeneddam into an ally in his campaign against non-representing art. The poet questions, with a polemical eagerness, the statements by Roland Barthes, who claimed that the Dutch artist was “in effect a painter of the absurd” and of “nothingness,” and stresses that Saeneddam escaped from the trap of nothingness, thanks to the “human” points of reference.

Herbert tried to create his own version of the story of Dutch painting. The concept of “extremely subjective art history” which he proposed, understood as a formula of love dialogue with painting, corresponds to his desire to tell stories about artists, who do not fit into frames of orderly and logical systems. His history of the Golden Age of Dutch painting, written as a story of *petits maîtres*, becomes an example and fulfillment of an irrational and unsystematic history of art, an attempt at touching what escapes all classifications.

Translated by Paweł Stachura