

The Image of the Town in the Paintings of the 17th Century Delft School of Painting: The Issue of Genre Synthesis

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Abstract: The article examines the works of the Dutch artists of the 17th century Delft School of painting, which exemplify a synthesis of townscape painting and the daily-life genre. The topicality of this subject is due to the fact that it has not been developed sufficiently enough in historiography. The article's scientific novelty lies in that it provides a detailed analysis of paintings based on the formal-stylistic and retrospective methods. Especial attention is given to the works of Carel Fabritius and Pieter de Hooch. The author comes to the conclusion that the paintings of the Delft artists are on the border of two genres - topographical townscape painting and the daily-life genre. In this context, they serve as the basis for the emergence of 18th century veduta painting.

Key words: Delft • 17th century Dutch painting, townscape • Daily-life genre • Perspective • Genre synthesis

INTRODUCTION

The 17th century is rightfully considered the Golden epoch of Dutch painting. The leading genres of this period were landscape painting and the daily-life genre. One of the painting centers in the 1650-s was the town of Delft, where the artistic school represented by such talented artists as Carel Fabritius, Jan Vermeer and Pieter de Hooch was formed and reached its heyday [1]. The guild of Delft artists in the 17th century also consisted of architects, gunmakers, faience potters and art merchants [2].

According to A. Wheelock, one of the reasons behind the blossoming of culture and arts in Delft was its historical past, rich in events, especially the 16th century, when the town was a bulwark in the struggle for the national independence of Holland against the Spanish Habsburgs. At the end of the 16th century, royal governors resided in the town. At the beginning of the 17th century, Delft also was a large trade center in Holland producing faience [3]. Compared with Amsterdam, which at the time held control over Dutch faience, or Leiden, the country's "scientific" capital, Delft stayed away from the country's business life. It attracted the top stratum of the Dutch bourgeoisie, who would stay here in search of tranquility away from the bustle of large cities [4].

The Delft painters depicted scenes from the everyday life of the Dutch bourgeoisie, often placing them within town settings. Themes created by them on the border of two genres demonstrate not just objects of architecture but a complex "image of the town", which consists of many nuances and episodes of the everyday. This genre synthesis forms in the viewer's visual perception a town space wherein architecture and daily scenes harmonically interact with each other. Note that the Delft School painters use a broad spectrum of painting means, including colorito, the light-and-aerial environment and optical perspective, which became their pathbreaking technique.

The issue of genre synthesis in the works of the 17th century Delft School of painting has been given almost no attention in historiography to this day. There are some local studies dedicated to Jan Vermeer's paintings (predominantly, monographs and articles by American scientists, W. Liedtke [5], M. Westermann [6], A. Wheelock [7]), while the work of other painters has been studied extremely superficially.

This article aims to analyze a number of works by the Delft School of painting, which represent a synthesis of the daily-life genre and townscape painting and based on the historical reconstruction of depicted objects of architecture evaluate the topographical credibility of town scenes in the paintings of C. Fabritius, J. Vermeer and P. de Hooch.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study of this issue warrants the application of an integrated methodology the fundamental components whereof are structural-compositional analysis and the formal-stylistic method. Using these methods makes it possible to thoroughly and comprehensively examine the monuments of painting and via a detailed dissection of the works provide an integral idea of each artist's art and the attributes of his creative techniques. This study also ought to employ the historical reconstruction method (the retrospective method), which helps determine the location of depicted objects of architecture and compare their modern appearance with samples in the paintings of the Delft School artists.

Main Part: Carel Fabritius (1622-1654) was the first painter to represent the Delft School in its heyday period. We know little of his creative work - mainly from the words of his biographer, Arnold Houbraken: "Carel Fabritius, a great perspective painter, perhaps the best of his time, was also a good portrait painter. His place and date of birth remain unclear, but his name has long gone down in the history of Delft" [8]. Over the short period of his stay in Delft (from 1650 to 1654), where Fabritius had come after several years of work in Amsterdam, in Rembrandt's studio, he managed to create just three paintings.

We find the interaction between the daily-life motif and townscape in Fabritius's work "A View of Delft, with a Musical Instrument Seller's Stall" (1652, London, the National Gallery), which features a panorama of the town painted with topographical accuracy. The composition can nominally be divided into two parts. The left part contains a genre scene, which is pushed out to the foreground as much as possible. The right part, which occupies almost a third of the image, features old Delft's buildings abruptly receding in perspective-the New Church (*Nieuwe Kerk*) and the canal's quay with houses lined up in a row. One might infer that the artist has captured a view onto the south-eastern part of the town from the corner intersection of the streets *Oude Langendijk* and *Oosteinde*. From the same point, the *Vrouwenregt* Street is making for the right. The temple in the far background serves as the composition's perspective center.

The artist depicts a little corner of a musical instrument stall where on the table covered with a blue tablecloth there are a lute and a viola de gamba and next to them is the frozen figure of the store attendant wearing a black coat and a hat. Fabritius accentuates the

contemplative, passive nature of the scene, thanks to which the painting features an amplified perception of the town's environment, which as if absorbs the man's figure. In this work, all of the composition's elements are important-none of them is superior to the others in conceptual significance. The musical instruments accentuated on the left are acting as part of the genre motif, which neighbors the architecture and is perceived in indissoluble unity with it. Thus, we cannot tell unambiguously which genre this painting belongs to. It represents one of Dutch townscapes joined up with a musical still-life and a daily-life scene [9]. The daily-life motifs and townscape chime in with each other in terms of the painting's theme [10].

The artistic techniques embodied in Fabritius's painting found continuation in the creative work of Jan Vermeer (1632-1675), who painted two townscapes: "The Little Street" (1657/1661, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum) and "View of Delft" (1660/1661, The Hague, Mauritshuis). Both paintings are distinguished by everyday down-to-earthness and an interest towards detail, which place it among the best creations of Dutch painting. Vermeer paints Delft as a wonderful town wherein people, space and objects are united into a single entity.

"The Little Street" is one of the most chamber paintings by Vermeer. The artist's creative genius creates in it a real color symphony and spiritualizes the small secluded world of burgers' daily life. The atmosphere of silence and quiet is especially facilitated by the light, which imparts to the painting's *couleur* traits of *en plein air*. The houses lined up in a row, which are observed from the opposite side of the street, are detailed to the maximum. Vermeer does not overlook the cracks and traces of whitewashing on the cobblestone streetway. It should be noted that the exact location of the scene Vermeer painted is not known. However, we can find many small streets lined with brick houses with high pediments in the very center of the town-the *Oude Delft* district, not far from the marketplace [11]. The similarity of houses located over there and those in the scene depicted by Vermeer leads us to the hypothesis on that the street depicted by him synthesizes a whole number of nooks in old Delft. At the same time, the master accentuates the façade of the house on the right, the majority of whose windows are closed with shutters. Vermeer picks a panoramic vantage point and positions all the architectural objects parallel to the painting's plane. This aspect leads us to infer that the artist was painting the scene of the street from the second floor of an opposite house [12]. In the depth of the courtyard, one can discern

the figures of two women engaged in household avocations and on the pavement two kids playing. The four nameless characters fully immersed in everyday activities animate the little street, demonstrating life unfolding in it.

Concurrently with Jan Vermeer, there worked in Delft artist Pieter de Hooch (1629 - 1684), whose pioneer work was the creation of a group of genre scenes on terraces, sometimes on almost desolate streets near the town wall and in courtyards adjacent to town houses. These compositions are joined in art study under the common name of "courtyards". An immutable interest in daily-life details is combined in them with concretization in depicting town architecture. In such scenes, the artist provides a relatively low outlook, as a result of which the focus of our attention captures, above all, the genre motif, while the fragments of town architecture are perceived as a supplement to it. Pieter de Hooch attaches importance to the characteristics of each of the characters, while the content of the genre scene is defined by the scene's venue [13].

The "courtyards" created by Pieter de Hooch are somewhat similar to each other-in them the same daily-life scenes are repeated. A courtyard is normally open in the foreground, from the viewer's side, - thus, the viewer gets involved with the theme and becomes a symbolic participant in the events. The down-to-earthness of daily life, which is hidden behind the luster of front façades, imparts special charm to the scenes. Little brick courtyards depicted in Pieter de Hooch's paintings can still be seen nowadays in the depth of old Delft houses- for instance, not far from the river port where the artist resided with his family [14].

Despite the fact that the nearby church spires and brick roofs of the houses remind one of the nearness of the town center with the marketplace, the courtyards in Pieter de Hooch's paintings remain almost unpeopled and lonesome. The artist shunned noisy streets, front quays and monumental squares. He strived to show not the multi-faced town full of chirpy crowds but the private life of one family, whose level, rhythmical course acts as a metaphor for the whirlabout of life on the whole.

This can be exemplified by his painting "Two Women and a Child in a Courtyard" (c. 1657, Toledo, the Museum of Art), which is characterized by a broad dense stroke, overall brown-and-ochreous tonality and pronounced contrasts in chiaroscuro. The artist depicts an old brick-paved courtyard. On the left, in the foreground the low stair steps open the passage through the gate; there is a

garden past it, which is beyond the boundaries of the painting. The painting is dominated by the tower of the New Church, which stands out forming a svelte silhouette at the background of the sky.

The image of the New Church's belfry can be seen only in the artist's very first "courtyards" - afterwards it is replaced with the image of the New Church. Both churches are shown at a close distance in the little street scene "A Woman and Child in a Bleaching Ground" (1657/1659, a private collection). The genre action here is taken outside the courtyard territory into the street. In the open field rimmed with town walls we see a woman and a child taking a stroll. The two gates (in the wall on the left and in the distant view) are open into adjoining courtyards - in the depth, the artist provides several genre episodes depicted from different aspects. In both paintings, the figures of the characters dominate the town environs; their presence spiritualizes the motionless architecture and creates an atmosphere of life unfolding in a town embodied in miniature.

Inferences: In conclusion, it is necessary to note that each of the cited artists of the Delft School of painting strived to deliver a tight unity of the daily-life genre and townscape painting and elaborate deep space and perspective. Through the example of a number of works, it was shown that all the different artists followed one common artistic method, which is built on delivering the geometric structure of a composition and a method of lighting using the nuancing of major color tones.

Note that the bright polychromatic palette accentuates the expressiveness of themes depicted. In the paintings of the Delft masters, objects and characters are interrelated in a multi-faceted, complexly organized space. The synthesis of the two genres in the paintings of the 17th century Delft School of painting facilitates the emotional perception of themes.

Thus, the realistic interpretation of architectural objects, along with the artists' attention to daily-life details, serves the purpose of creating not topographical landscapes as such but the image of a living town, with its inimitable atmosphere and traditions. These achievements, in turn, set the scene for the emergence of the 18th century genre of veduta.

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