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Rocking the Cradle of Dutch Domesticity: A Radical Reinterpretation of Seventeenth-Century “Homescapes”¹

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IRENE CIERAAD
**ROCKING THE
CRADLE OF DUTCH
DOMESTICITY: A
RADICAL
REINTERPRETATION
OF SEVENTEENTH-
CENTURY
“HOMESCAPES”¹**

Abstract In the light of a newly discovered source of thousands of seventeenth-century Dutch letters found in the English National Archive a case is made for a radical reinterpretation of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings. These so-called “homescapes” feature in the historiography of the modern home as proof of the fact that seventeenth-century Holland was the cradle of female domesticity. However, the captured Dutch letters written to the home front by seamen sailing on the large Dutch mercantile fleet, as well as the women’s letters to their seafaring husbands tell

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quite a different story. Especially the letters from the home front narrate of dire circumstances and shed a new light on the subjects of the homescapes, more in particular on the subject of letter-reading and letter-writing females, and intimate mother-and-child scenes. The nineteenth-century revaluation of the glory of seventeenth-century Dutch painting in general and the homescapes in particular explains how the myth of Holland as the cradle of female domesticity came into existence.

KEYWORDS: domesticity, 17th century Dutch genre painting, price papers, gender, art history, maritime history

INTRODUCTION



Seventeenth-century Holland is generally perceived as the cradle of female domesticity and the origin of the modern idea of the home (Rybczynski 1986; Schama 1987; Borzello 2006; Flanders 2015). This shared perception is created by the numerous paintings of domestic settings, called “homescapes,” with not only beautifully dressed women engaged in music making or letter reading and writing like Gabriel Metsu’s famous portrayal of a woman reading a letter, as well as the numerous paintings of more plainly dressed women engaged in childcare, like the ones painted by Pieter de Hooch (Franits 2006; Figures 1 and 2). The fact that women are the main characters in these paintings of domestic scenes has contributed to the interpretation of these women as housewives keeping the home. For that matter, the relative absence of men in these domestic scenes was never an issue as it fitted the dominant ideology of their separate spheres (Loughman 2014: 105). However, the rise to global power of a small maritime nation like the Dutch had its impact on both the lives of ordinary citizens and Dutch society at large, such as the huge absentee labor force of young men risking their lives at sea and leaving their wives behind for most of the year.

In the following male absence is illustrated using a newly discovered source of private correspondence and in the light of this fresh source also the purpose of the paintings will be reinterpreted. In view of the contents of the letters from the home front to their seafaring husbands which often revealed a dire home situation due to several devastating plague epidemics and invasions of cruel armies a case is made for a radically new interpretation of the paintings presenting in essence a male ideal of the home by creating soothing images of ideal homes with thriving women and children. The seventeenth century was without doubt a golden era for merchants accumulating their fortunes, but for the bulk of the population that depended



Figure 1

Gabriel Metsu, *Woman Reading a Letter*, ca. 1664–66. Presented by Sir Alfred and Lady Beit, 1987 (Beit Collection), Photo copyright National Gallery of Ireland.

on seafaring wage-earners it never was (Wijsenbeek-Olthuis 1987; Van der Wiel 1996). Although now known and celebrated as the Dutch Golden Age, it was only glorified as such in the nineteenth century to create a collective national past in the process of state formation. Still, the imagery created by the seventeenth-century idealized homescapes, like the image of a well-dressed woman seated in a domestic interior while attentively reading or writing, or the intimate mother-and-child scenes, has left a lasting imprint on the way women have been photographed and painted in interior settings from the nineteenth century onwards (Cieraad 2016a). The imagery will not lose its relevance for the present, but the social and historical contexts as described in the letters from the home front to the men at sea will most definitely affect the way we look at these iconic paintings.

Figure 2

Pieter De Hooch, *Woman with Children in an Interior*, ca. 1658–60. Courtesy of the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco (gift of the Samuel H. Kress Foundation).



CAPTURED CORRESPONDENCE

A treasure of thousands and thousands of private Dutch letters written in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had been locked away for centuries in the archives of the High Court of Admiralty now stored in the English National Archive in Kew. Their first discovery in the late 1970s was a well-kept secret within a small circle of maritime historians (Braunius 1980). More than 20 years later the letters were rediscovered by Dutch historians and historical linguists (Van Megen 2006: 26–27). In 2005 a long-term research project, titled “The Sailing Letters,” was initiated in order to categorize the letters and transcribe the old Dutch handwritings into printed words to enable the study of their contents (Van Gelder 2007). “The Sailing Letters” was an apt name for the project, for at their seizure these letters were indeed found on Dutch ships captured by the English in the many sea battles between these two nations. In the capture,

not only a ship and its cargo, but also the mail that ship was transporting to its destination and the crew's personal belongings including their private correspondences, were confiscated by the English as war loot, or so-called "prize papers," and carefully locked away (Van Vliet 2007: 47–67). As a consequence of these hostile acts over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a total amount of 38,000 Dutch letters of which 16,000 personal letters never reached their addressees.² Of these "only" 4,500 captured letters were written in the seventeenth century (Van Gelder 2007: 540–541). Still their sheer number might give an indication of the vast number of letters that may have safely reached their destination (Braunius 1980: 22; Sutton et al. 2003: 32).

Strange as it may be, the predominance of females in the paintings has never been interpreted as a reflection of a historic reality in the Netherlands. The many portrayals of letter-writing and -reading women in seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting have not gone unnoticed. Leading art historians, however, have predominantly interpreted the act of writing and reading letters as a leisure activity of well-to-do women engaged in amorous affairs (Sutton et al. 2003; Franits 2004: 104). The discovery of the letters sheds a new light on the portrayals of both letter-writing and -reading females and young mothers with little children in domestic settings.³ Especially the latter genre of life-like domestic portrayals have fascinated art historians, as they perceived these mother-and-child scenes as early manifestations of female domesticity which in other parts of the western world developed only in the nineteenth century (Loughman 2014; Westermann 2001: 59; De Mare 1999: 14). However, seamen's wives were far from docile creatures who stayed in the home. They had a special legal status as being competent to make decisions on their own and often had to make their own living to get by (De Wit 2010). As loyal and equal marriage partners they were expected to take care of the house and their financial affairs during their husbands' long absences (De Wit 2008: 201; Van der Wal 2008: 39).

The many consecutive letters from the home front found in the archive mentioned earlier bear witness to the treasuring of letters as mementoes of home, much like photographs now. Only one unique collection of letters from a captain to his wife ended up in a Dutch archive, which means that his wife treasured his letters in the same way as most seamen did theirs (Bruijn and van Eyck van Heslinga 1985). As yet, there is no count of the relative numbers of intercepted letters written by seamen, or those from the home front. So far especially letters from the home front to the men at sea have been transcribed and published, probably due to the historical linguists' research interest in the phrasings and wordings in letters written by women from the same town (Van Megen 2006: 26–27). Although most seamen were not able to read and write, neither

were their wives, but both could use the services of more or less professional letter writers. These services of letter writing and reading were also offered on board of the ships. Just as reading aloud the delivered letter was a common task of a messenger. However, a less emotional style and obligatory formulas betray these letters ordered, whereas autographs are more emotional in style and content (Nobels 2013). Still the cherishing of the home letters did not depend on personal handwriting, but on being emotional life-lines and material connections with the home front. Also the counting of the number of letters written and received is invariably presented as a confirmation of this connection, or a complaint of the lack of it (Van der Wal 2008: 38; Van Vliet 2007).

The letters from the women left behind to their men at sea all shed a light on the life histories of seamen's wives who had to cope financially and emotionally with the hardships of being a lone mother and wife in the rough times of plague epidemics (Van Megen 2006; Van Vliet 2007; Van der Wal 2010). Despite the many publications of historians and linguists on the Sailing Letters, so far, no art historian has paid any attention to the interconnections between the absentee husbands, the female-dominated home front and the flourishing of specific subjects, such as letter-writing and -reading women and domestic scenes of young mothers with their children (Franits 2004; Sutton et al. 2003; Chambers and Westermann 2001; Watkins 1984). Recently the Sailing Letters project has been renamed Prize Papers and it focuses on the digitalization of the letters. As yet only a small portion of the vast collection has been transcribed and published.⁴

The reinterpretation of the homescapes presented here is based on the Dutch publications resulting from this research project. All covers of the consecutive volumes invariably feature a detail of a seventeenth-century painting of a letter-reading or -writing female (e.g. Van Gelder 2008; Van der Wal 2010). From the disciplinary perspective of the participating historians and linguists these paintings relate to the historic reality of the seventeenth century, while within the international circle of art historians and experts on seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting, as these paintings have officially been categorized, there is a general consensus on their deceptive realism (Robinson 1974; De Jongh 1986; Blankert 1995; Wheelock 1995; Fock 2001a; Sutton et al. 2003; Franits 2004; De Mare 2012).⁵ In Wayne Franits' words: "their ostensible capacity to proffer immediate access to the past, is paradoxically the most deceptive" (2004: 1). Considering the unique primary source of the Sailing Letters in combination with information on seventeenth-century home inventories a more realistic interpretation is warranted, without discrediting the prevailing art-historical interpretations altogether.

LOVE LETTERS OR EMOTIONAL LIFE-LINES?

Since the second half of the twentieth century and mainly under the influence of Panofsky's iconographic tradition in art history, the dominant interpretation of seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting concentrates on deciphering the coded, and often moral messages of the mundane objects depicted with the help of printed material, ranging from the Holy Bible to popular picture books (Brenner et al. 2007: 60–61; De Jongh 1986). According to this iconographic interpretation the paintings are full of symbolic references to the primary classification of social reality as a male-oriented public and a female-oriented private, that is, domestic territory. For instance, shoes on a man's feet symbolize their use in the public space of the street, while a lady's slipper that is flung about, like the one in Gabriel Metsu's painting "Woman Reading a Letter" (ca. 1664–1666) is a negation of the shoe's use in public space and interpreted as a symbol of private, domestic territory (Cieraad 1999: 43; De Mare 2012: 52)⁶ (Figure 1). This interpretation is based amongst others on the rhymed advisory book of Jacob Cats (1625) on the marriage rules for husband and wife, a favorite source of art historians (Schama 1987; De Mare 1999; 2012: 235; Loughman 2014: 86).

A seventeenth-century picture book (1634) addressing love-sick adolescents is another pivotal and recurring reference in iconographic interpretations, notably of paintings representing a seascape in the background, like in the Metsu painting mentioned above where the maid standing beside the letter-reading woman lifts the curtain partly covering a seascape⁷ (Figure 1). One image in this picture book, titled in translation "Even far away, you are always in my heart," is used to decode the symbolic meaning of the depicted sea piece.⁸ In the image a boat steered by Cupid brings a male lover to a woman waiting ashore on the top of a cliff. The verse below the image compares the commotions of his love for the woman with the high tides of the sea and the lover himself as the boat that has to keep afloat (Cieraad 2016b: 53). In iconographic interpretations these lines form the key to decoding the symbolic meaning of a seascape in the background as symbolizing the hazards of love (Watkins 1984: 207; Wheelock 1995: 182; Sutton et al. 2003: 82; Franits 2004: 35). In the Metsu painting it functions as a pictorial comment on the letter in the lady's hands of the lady, a love letter most probably. For that matter all letter-reading and -writing females have systematically been identified as love-sick creatures (Franits 2004: 104, 110).

However, the title of this key image "Even far away, you are always in my heart," could well have been a quote from one of the sailing letters.⁹ Also a reinterpretation of the key image itself seems plausible,

in which the man standing on the boat represents the sailing husband and the woman standing ashore represents his wife waiting for a safe return. Cupid might very well represent the passion and longing of separated lovers. Much like that of a sailor's wife who in a letter to her husband described her longing for his speedy return "My darling you wrote to me that at night when you are in your berth you take the cushion in your arms and pretend that I am with you, and you also wrote that I should do the same. However, it does not help. I have to endure the time waiting for your return" (Van Megen 2006:40).¹⁰ The longing expressed in the letters to and from the home front concentrate on the reciprocal missing of loved ones and nostalgic longings for moments of shared intimacy. A captain wrote "My dearest wife, I wish I could spend the night with you and just chat (...) I keep thinking of our last night together" (De Wit 2008: 205).¹¹ Also the wife of a trumpeter sailing on a battle ship who envisioned in her letter that upon her husband's safe return they will enjoy each other's company in the privacy of the home. She writes "We will lock the door and send our friends away. When we are happy together all is well, for our friends will not give us this happiness" (Van Vliet 2007: 139).¹² The closing of the front door to attain the longed for privacy and intimacy is a significant detail in this letter, as it contrasts with the pictorial representation of domestic scenes which often show a view of the street through an open door.

One might expect that the men at sea would also express in their letters a longing for the material comforts of home, a warm or cool place to relax, a comfortable bed to sleep in, or a nice home-cooked dinner, but nothing of the sort. Although the number of women's letters transcribed outnumber those of seamen, it is significant that the men did not complain about the lack of material comforts on board the ships. Ships were far from luxury resorts, but they might be regarded as floating Dutch communities, where the language was Dutch and where one ate familiar Dutch food (Dillo 1987: 53–54). Still it is remarkable that the seamen did not refer to domesticity's material basis. In contrast, however, the men idealized the emotional and intimate bond with their spouse and children, hoping it to be mutual. Therefore the men were deeply concerned when they no longer received a letter from home. A captured letter (1665) written by a young captain, who was caught in a delayed journey off Africa's coast, wrote to his wife how much he missed her and the children, and begged her to write back as over half a year had passed since he had received a letter from her. Also the uncertainty of not knowing how much longer he would be off Africa's coast proved to be so nerve-racking that despite the promise of promotion he wanted to return home and end his career as a captain. He wrote "My dearest darling, I never again want to be separated from you for so long, for my heart desires to be with you and our two dear children." He

closed his letter by expressing his deepest desire to return home safely and to be together and rejoice at raising their children “Kiss them for me and when I am back I will give you a thousand kisses in return” (Van der Wal 2008: 39–40).¹³

In view of these often emotional letters another or at least supplementary interpretation of the paintings of letter-reading and -writing females is warranted.¹⁴ From a historian’s perspective the letters qualify as valuable primary sources contemporary to the paintings, whereas the printed material on which the iconographic interpretation of art historians is based falls in the lesser category of secondary sources. Trapped in the interpretation of all the letters depicted being love letters, Wheelock, an expert in Johannes Vermeer’s paintings, had to ignore the obvious fact that the woman depicted in the painting “Letter-Reading Woman in Blue” (ca.1663–1664) is pregnant (1995: 39) (Figure 3). The numerous letters between the Dutch home front and the men at sea, however, make it far more likely that the depicted woman is meant to represent a seaman’s wife who attentively reads a letter from her loving husband, who as expressed in one of the letters transcribed wishes to be home when she is to deliver the baby (Van Gelder 2008: 113).

“SLICES OF LIFE” OR DECEPTIVE REALISM?

Wayne Franits is most outspoken in his opinion on the deceptive realism of the paintings “If anything, it should disabuse contemporary viewers of any naive assumption that seventeenth-century Dutch genre paintings are simple ‘slices of life’.” He justifies his claim of fiction by stating that if genre paintings would really represent daily life, then the range of potential subjects would have been inexhaustible. Considering the Netherlands’ status of a pre-eminent maritime power, numerous representations of dock workers or other scenes related to this flourishing commerce might be expected, yet, Franits claims, virtually none exist (2004: 1–2). His main argument is the narrow range of subjects in view of the many commercial and ship-building activities. Still the historic facts of a huge absentee male labor force sailing on the large Dutch mercantile fleet and the many battle ships and its direct consequences of a female-dominated home front have so far been ignored.¹⁵ Also the objects depicted in the paintings of letter-writing or -reading women, not only the seascapes mentioned earlier or the predominance of huge maps in the background, but also the depicted exotic luxury items of pearl necklaces or ear-rings, Persian carpets and china have never been linked to seafaring husbands or male relatives (Ydema 1999: 111; Dibbitts and Rooijackers 1995). Whereas gift giving provided an important material and emotional connection between the men at sea and their relatives at home as well as one of the few consolations of being married to a seaman (De Wit 2008: 202–3). Like a

Figure 3
Johannes Vermeer,
*Letter-Reading Woman in
Blue*, ca. 1663–64.
Courtesy of the
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



woman who wrote to her husband in the East: “Bring me something really pretty and some cotton too, so I can show that my husband is an East India sailor” (Van Megan 2006: 37).¹⁶

In the more realistic interpretation put forward here the theme of letter-reading and -writing women is first and foremost a portrayal of the communication between the home front and a loved one sailing on one of the many ships of the East Indian Trading Company or naval battle ships.¹⁷ In this interpretation also a seascape in the background of the paintings of letter-reading women seems a more plausible visual clue to the location of the sender aboard of a ship, just as the wrecked condition of a depicted ship seems a visual clue to the critical situation of the sender. In the same vein a map depicted in the background more likely alludes to the far-away journeys and foreign destinations mentioned in the seamen’s letters.¹⁸ In contrast to seascapes, however, art historians have

never symbolically or iconographically related maps to love letters. Especially the Delft painter Johannes Vermeer is known for the depiction of large maps in his backgrounds, like in his painting of the pregnant “Letter-Reading Woman in Blue” (Wheelock 1995: 135, 147, 154) (Figure 3).

Maps are perceived by art historians as common seventeenth-century wall decorations. Still, a comparative historical research of seventeenth-century home inventories of coastal towns versus inland towns has indicated that homes in coastal towns did not only have significantly more maps as wall decorations, but also significantly more paintings (Dibbitts 1998: 283-4; De Wit 2008). These findings support a realistic interpretation in view of the fact that maps were evidently more useful wall decorations in the interiors of coastal town homes where most of the families of seafaring men lived, than in those of inland towns (Loughman 2012: 97). A map in combination with the information mentioned in the letter enabled the reader to visualize the location of a seafaring husband or son. Therefore maps are more often depicted in the paintings of letter-reading women, than in those of letter-writing ladies who have no clue of the location of the addressee other than his being on a certain vessel.

In contrast to the many exotic objects in the portrayals of well-off women reading or writing letters there seem to be no objects referring to far-away places in Pieter de Hooch’s paintings of domestic scenes of caring young mothers and their little children as produced in his Delft period. The notable exception is an orange, named “Chinese apple” in Dutch, which is prominently displayed on the mantelpiece in several paintings, for instance in “Woman and Children in an Interior”¹⁹ (Franits 2006: 42) (Figure 2). The supposed Chinese origin of oranges had to do with the fact that the ships coming from the Far East filled with china and spice, on their way back also loaded oranges in the harbors of the Mediterranean. In other paintings oranges are combined with Chinese vases (Westermann 2001: 62; De Mare 2012: 409, plate 3). In his Delft period De Hooch evidently portrayed common people, considering the more simply dressed women who also were the most likely ones to be illiterate and depending on the help of professional writers and kind readers to assist in their written communication. As such they could not be portrayed when writing or reading letters, or with maps in the background.²⁰ Like they could not afford paintings as wall decoration.²¹

Other critics of the potential realism of these paintings targeted the architectural aberrations in seventeenth-century Dutch homescapes in addition to the actual exclusivity of patterned black and white marble floors and the depicted brass chandeliers (Loughman 2014: 90–93; Flanders 2015: 6–9).²² The exclusivity and thus deceptive ordinary-ness of the depicted interior furnishings is based on a comparison with written records of seventeenth-century

home inventories, the so-called probate inventories (Fock 2001a; 2001b).²³ On account of a comparison between the number of furniture items mentioned in the inventories and the number of furniture items depicted in the paintings, art historians had one more reason to discredit the realism of the paintings. It appeared that on average the records mentioned more furniture and decorative items in the dwellings than visible in the sparsely furnished rooms in the paintings. However, this comparison could also pertain to present-day imagery of design interiors, which look so clean and tidy because many items are removed before the picture is taken (Loughman 2014: 107).

Despite evident criticism on the suggestive effects of the paintings, there is in view of the captured correspondence and the social historic circumstances of a female-dominated home, a strong case for a more realistic relation between objects and persons displayed in the paintings than art historians find plausible. The relation of paintings to reality is a complicated one. It is a common truth that some subjects in art, like the female nude have been more popular than others, but that does not mean that women in daily life were actually sitting around naked. Even realistic 'slices of life' in photography do not picture the most mundane activities, like visiting a bathroom, for there is always a culturally dominated selection of subjects. The relation between image and reality becomes even more intriguing when one realizes that letter-writing and -reading women were only a popular subject in seventeenth-century painting, and not in eighteenth or nineteenth-century Dutch painting, although letter writing remained the main means of long-distance communication in real life and love letters are of all times (Van Gelder 2008: 146–271). The same holds good for the many seventeenth-century portrayals of a mother caring for her child, whose depictions are virtually absent in eighteenth-century and even fewer in nineteenth-century Dutch painting, while in real life mothers remained the main caretakers of their children. So the real quest should be why both subjects were so popular in seventeenth-century Holland.

WHOSE GOLDEN AGE?

The mythical proportions of the Dutch Golden Age have to do with the rise of a small maritime nation to global power. Its concomitant flourishing of the arts has intrigued many renowned authors. Simon Schama (1987) for instance has focused on the strange contrast in the psyche of rich merchants who were restrained by their protestant ethic of thrift, but at the same time desperate to show off their new wealth by the purchase of grand houses, expensive interior decorations and collections of paintings. The settlement of now famous painters, such as Gabriel Metsu, Pieter de Hooch, Johannes Vermeer, and Jan Steen in one of the towns with an office of the

East Indian Trading Company (VOC), has always been explained in reference to a town's wealthy merchants and the profitable art market they created. Records of seventeenth-century art production reveal that homescapes in particular were among the most popular genre paintings (Goosens in Brenner et al. 2007: 40).

Spurred by the flourishing sea-trade with the Far East more and more ships sailed the oceans with crews not knowing when or whether they would return home. A sailing journey to the East took at least 6 months, but when crews were exchanged at Dutch trading posts in Africa and relocated on ships that returned to the East a voyage could easily extend into years. Not only the capture of ships but also the conquest of Dutch trading posts in Africa was part of ongoing hostilities between the English and the Dutch. Voyages could be delayed for months waiting for Dutch battle ships to reconquer the outpost. Also the many battleships that protected the mercantile fleet were often sent on secret missions leaving crews in great uncertainty and dismay (Van Vliet 2007; Van der Wal 2008: 35). In other words, a large part of the able male workforce not only sailors, naval officers and soldiers, but also a great number of craftsmen and clerks were away from home for a considerable period of time (Dillo 1987: 47–56; Wijzenbeek-Olthuis 1987).

The growing popularity of the subjects of letter-writing and -reading women and caring-mother scenes since the mid seventeenth century has intrigued art historians but has generally been attributed to the extraordinary skills of their painters (Loughman 2014: 92–93). Not only the superb painterly expression of the materials of the women's dresses, but also the unconventional, snapshot-like portrayal of women caught in mid-action have captivated many observers. In contrast to the full-faced portraits Rembrandt is famous for these paintings show a surprising number of women viewed from behind, like the maid who lifts the curtain in Gabriel Metsu's painting (Figure 1). Also, the portrayed women never look at the beholder but are portrayed as being deeply engaged in an activity, like the lady in Metsu's painting who is attentively reading a letter. The painterly expression of the material of the lady's dress was clearly more important than the expression on her face. The depicted women seem to convey the message to the beholder that their looks do not count, but only their material well-being.

Most intriguing are two paintings by Pieter Codde both showing only the back of a lady dressed in black with bent head and shoulders holding a letter in her hand (Sutton et al. 2003: 85–86). In a plausible interpretation both women are unquestionably in mourning, not so much because of the black clothing which was customary for the Calvinist merchant class in the first half of the century, but more so the bent heads and shoulders and the black mourning veils that attest to the women's grief. Even Wayne Franits hesitates in his

explanation of a painting by Dirck Hals, titled “Woman Tearing up a Letter.” (Figure 4) The woman dressed in black tears up a letter while looking sadly out of the window. Now Franits’ comment on the seascape of a shipwreck in the background alludes to a more plausible interpretation in saying that it provides “visual clues that augment our understanding of the scene,” without actually explaining them (2004: 32, 106). In combining the subjects of the paintings with the contents of the letters it is far more credible that these women are portrayed as widows, who received their husband’s final letter or the confirmation of his death, for the news of lost ships travelled faster to the home front than mail did. Their husbands’ decease left the women in a destitute situation without any income or financial compensation, for neither the East Indian Trading Company nor its twin company for the West Indies paid the wages of deceased employees (De Wit 2010).

In other words the global mercantile activities of both trading companies created a strong class divide between the residential merchant families who profited from the global trade, and the poor sailors’ families, more in particular their wives and widows, who paid the price for these global activities by losing their husbands and main wage-earners without any compensation.²⁴ The large number of seamen who lost their lives at sea also accounts for a high number of widows in the seventeenth century (Wijsenbeek-Olthuis 1987: 115). Whereas normal demographics would show far more widowers as women frequently died in childbirth. The number of children born in these sailors’ families was extremely low, due to the long periods of a husband’s absence. As such it was the best contraceptive, and sailing husbands could not be fooled into fatherhood when away at the time of conception. However, to survive emotionally during these long journeys sailing husbands clung to the idea that all was well on the home front.

IDEAL-HOME IMAGES IN TRYING TIMES

They were rough times in the seventeenth century and especially in the latter half due to several pestilences which wiped out a large portion of the urban population in the west of the country in whose towns the offices of the trading companies were to be found. Not only various Plagues took their toll but also the atrocities of invading armies. The French army slaughtered much of the population in the south, and German armies attacked the population in the north and east of the country (Van der Sman 1996). In a letter to her husband a woman seriously doubts if she will survive the marching French troops for reports were coming that soldiers killed everyone on their way. The French atrocities led to streams of refugees seeking refuge in the towns in the west, while The Plague hitting these same towns also set people adrift (Van Gelder 2008:127–130). In other words



Figure 4

Dirck Hals, *Woman Tearing up a Letter*, 1631.
 Courtesy of the
 Landesmuseum Mainz,
 Germany.

seamen's wives had to cope not only financially, but also emotionally with the hardships of being a lone mother in these trying times (Van Megen 2006: 35; De Wit 2008: 209; Brouwer 2014).

In the year of 1672 when the situation was really disastrous a seaman's wife wrote to her husband: "I had to send our son to the office of the East Indian Trading Company for I could not feed him anymore. He is still so young, only nine years old. Imagine the sorrow it gives me to send such a young child away. Please help me to survive, and send some cloth I can sell to make a profit" (Brouwer 2014: 258; Van Gelder 2008: 135–136).²⁵ Also in her letter dated 1673 a seaman's wife in Amsterdam gives an account of her desperate visit to the office of the trading company in an attempt to get some money. The money is denied her due to the fact that not a single ship had returned safely to Amsterdam (Van Gelder 2008: 143–144). In a letter dated 1665 a sailor's wife informed her husband on the loss of 112 ships captured by the English, who also made the Dutch sailors prisoners of war (Van Gelder 2008: 107). The many sea battles with the English took their toll on the lives of both the men at sea, and the families they had left behind (Brouwer 2014).²⁶

Despite the trying circumstances for most of the population and seamen's wives in particular, nothing of the sort is shown on the paintings by the Delft painter Pieter de Hooch who portrayed women and children in the best of health, well-fed, properly dressed. Apparently they were financially taken well care of by an invisible bread-winner who enabled his wife to solely attend to her maternal

and domestic duties. Most prominent in his domestic scenes is the interaction between the young mother and one or two children. The young mother is portrayed as a stable figure who is standing or sitting and performing a maternal duty like nursing or combing her child's hair for lice while another child is engaged in play. In representing ideal images of happy, healthy and playful children with caring young mothers attending to their needs De Hooch's paintings give the impression that all was well on the home front.

However, due to the disastrous events and the subsequent economic decline also the art market collapsed. Even a productive painter like Pieter de Hooch had difficulty in getting by. He therefore left Delft for Amsterdam hoping for a more wealthy clientele (Franits 2006). He arrived in the early 1660s in the midst of one of the worst pestilences that struck the city. Initially he changed the subjects of his paintings to serve a more wealthy Amsterdam clientele and portrayed merchant families and merry companies of well-dressed men and women, but soon he returned to his favorite domestic scenes of a mother with her child. Only this time the mothers were better dressed than their Delft predecessors, and often accompanied by a maid. In 1663 when the epidemic was at its peak and over 14,000 people in Amsterdam died in that year alone, De Hooch painted a very sunny picture of a wealthy, and most of all healthy young mother with her child, titled "A Woman Peeling Apples" (Brouwer 2014: 278)²⁷ (Figure 5).

The letters from the women were extremely sad in reporting the deaths and diseases of children and relatives (Van Megen 2006: 135). Like a young mother who describes her deepest sorrow on the death of her boy due to The Plague. She writes "My dearest and beloved husband I am so sad about our son is demise that I have been unable to write to you. When I think of him it is as if my heart bursts inside my body" (Braunius 1980: 19–20).²⁸ In another letter a mother quite vividly described the screaming death struggle of her little daughter. She ends her letter with "When you left we were with five, but now we are only the three of us. And only God knows if our suffering is enough for we are clearly being punished for our sins" (Van Gelder 2008: 85–86).²⁹ It is sad to realize that cries of the heart like this one never reached their intended addressees, and their husband's non-response must have added to the sorrow of the grieving mothers.

In the same period that De Hooch painted his sunny picture of a healthy mother and child, Gabriel Metsu painted a far more gloomy one, which has been titled "The Sick Child" (ca.1664–1666), portraying a mother holding her sick child (Figure 6). Contrary to his usual approach he portrayed the little girl full face, which might indicate a more intimate relation with the child. It is suggested that it might represent his wife holding their dying daughter. A few years before he



Figure 5

Pieter De Hooch, *A Woman Peeling Apples*, 1663. Courtesy of The Wallace Collection, London.

also painted “A Sick Woman and a Weeping Maidservant” (Waiboer 2012: 69). Gabriel Metsu himself died of The Plague in 1667 and presumably “The Sick Child” was one of his last paintings. In painting real sorrow in a domestic setting Metsu was exceptional and in doing so he shattered the ideal-home illusions of his contemporaries. The sad Metsu paintings have long been ignored, as they did not fit in with the national myth created in the nineteenth century in which the imagery of the seventeenth century had to abide by the idea of a Golden Age of prosperity, heroism and health.

Considering the trying times it seems that optimistic paintings like De Hooch’s served to keep at least the illusion alive that all was well on the home front. Probate inventories show that the number of genre paintings had doubled in the first half of the seventeenth century, and its proliferation continued in the latter half when the home situation for most of the population became worse and worse (Loughman and Montias 2000: 54–55; Brenner et al. 2007: 40).³⁰

Figure 6

Gabriel Metsu, *The Sick Child*, ca. 1664–66.
Courtesy of the
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



However, the seamen who needed the illusion most were most probably not the ones who could afford to buy De Hooch's paintings. There is not much information on who owned what painting, but the records show that a Delft linen cloth merchant owned at least eleven of his paintings (Franits 2006: 5). Judging De Hooch's frequent reuse of similar scenes Franits concludes that the painter "sought to capitalize on the ready market for these types of paintings" (2006: 15).

Most of De Hooch's paintings will have been bought by the ones who profited most from the revenues of the East Indian Trading Company that went into the local economy, like the numerous residential clerks, tradesmen and better-off merchants living in and around Delft. The most prominent room to display the acquired wealth of paintings in was the spacious entrance hall (so-called *voorhuis*) of a house which was open to public view as it was both glazed and bordered the street. Over the seventeenth century the entrance hall of the expanding trading class developed into a

prestigious gallery space displaying not only ever more paintings on a variety of subjects, but also an increasing number of maps (Loughman and Montias 2000: 54–55, 67). Even the poor and less well-to-do could enjoy the paintings of Vermeer and De Hooch by simply passing by the houses of the more well-to-do. Painters also sold their works in stalls on markets, and used their own entrance halls as exhibition spaces (Van der Veen 1996; Fock 2001b: 110). The fact that the home inventories of coastal towns showed more paintings than those of inland towns might be another indication of a higher demand for collective consolation in seafaring communities (Dibbits 1998: 283–284; De Wit 2008). Soothing ideal-home images to keep up the spirit of not only seafaring husbands during their long periods of absence, but also their wives and children anxiously waiting for his return.

A MYSTERY RESOLVED?

Considering the popularity of the subject of cheerful mothers with their playful healthy children in the seventeenth century it is a mystery why the subject went out of fashion all of a sudden in the beginning of the eighteenth century (Borzello 2006: 18). A simple explanation might be that De Hooch as the main producer of these images had died in 1684, but that does not explain why eighteenth-century painters and their patrons were no longer interested in the intimate mother-and-child scenes or letter-reading and -writing females, while other subjects from the seventeenth century, in particular the female performance of domestic chores, were readily adopted (Aono 2011: 127–132).³¹ Mothers and children do appear in eighteenth-century genre painting, but husbands and fathers are always prominently present. A more distant relation between the mothers and their children is another striking feature of eighteenth-century family scenes.

A more daring explanation for this apparent mystery is that the compensatory need for these ideal-home images had waned in the eighteenth century. Better job opportunities ashore did no longer force able young men into the hardships of a seaman's existence. In the course of the eighteenth century the East Indian Trading Company was confronted with such a shortage of Dutch men willing to enlist that they had to hire more than 3000 Germans to sail the Dutch battle ships (Van Gelder 2008: 249; Van der Wal 2010: 45). Except for the sea battles with the English between 1780 and 1784, the domestic situation was relatively quiet as there were no more outbursts of The Plague and although some hostilities with the neighboring countries did go on they did not affect the population as before. Also a definitely more optimistic tone pervaded the eighteenth-century letters from the home front, which was not necessarily in the Netherlands anymore, but in one of the colonies in

the West or East Indies where Dutchmen had settled and made their homes (Van Gelder 2008: 146–248; Van der Wal 2010: 45–146). This might be another indication that was less need of soothing images. Also the home situation in the Netherlands as described in an eighteenth-century letter by a captain's wife more or less resembles De Hooch's ideal mother-and-child scenes. She writes about how much he is missed, not only by her but also by his little boy whose playfulness provides her with much needed distraction. She is particularly moved by her son's endearing way of kissing his father's letters and portrait (Moree 2003; Van Gelder 2008: 162–166).

But why would the subject of letter-writing and -reading women have fallen out of grace in eighteenth-century genre painting, when writing letters remained the only means of long distance communication as evidenced by the even larger number of captured letters from the eighteenth century. Again, all painters who had become famous for these portrayals like Metsu had died in the latter half of the seventeenth century, but that does not explain why this subject became irrelevant for eighteenth-century Dutch genre painters. One explanation might be that the level of literacy among the Dutch population had strongly risen in the eighteenth century, which made letter writing a more common activity. The loss of distinctive quality not only pertained to the act of writing, but also to the exotic objects embellishing the portrayals of letter-writing ladies, like the Persian carpet draped on their writing desks, or the pearl ear-rings and necklaces.³² Also the portrayed female bond between the writing or reading mistress and her maid-servant dissolved in a class divide in eighteenth-century Dutch genre painting when individual, toiling maids became the most popular subject.

A national revival of the taste for seventeenth-century paintings took over a century. The seventeenth century only got its golden medal of fame in the Dutch nation building-process, which started around the 1850s. Its glorification created the myth of the Dutch Golden Age.³³ The myth stressed the material character of its glory in celebrating the commercial successes and global powers of forefathers who had brought tremendous wealth and prosperity to the nation, considering the paintings of wealthy and healthy citizens. Paintings mainly produced in the towns with trading company offices which were only located in the West of the country were treasured as proof of a collective and glorious past. The Dutch nation in the nineteenth century had to believe that all was well on the seventeenth-century home front as "proven" by the neat and tidy interiors, the posh ladies wearing pearls and silk dresses, and well-fed children who played and did not need to work and toil like the working-class children of the nineteenth century.

The idealization of seventeenth-century homescapes has never stopped since. Paintings like Metsu's "Woman Reading a Letter,"

(Figure 1) have played and still play a key role in the historiography of domesticity and the home, as witnessed in the title and cover image of Judith Flanders' recent book *The Making of Home: The 500-Year Story of How Our Houses Became Homes* (2015) (Figure 7). In the introduction she states that the paintings are "the very epitome of homeness" (2015: 5). Although Flanders takes sides with the art historians who dispute the material relation of these paintings to the historic reality of the probate inventories, she does not address the discontinuity of the subjects in eighteenth-century Dutch genre painting (2015: 7–10). Her eighteenth-century sources in the historiography of domesticity have shifted to the development of privacy in English homes.

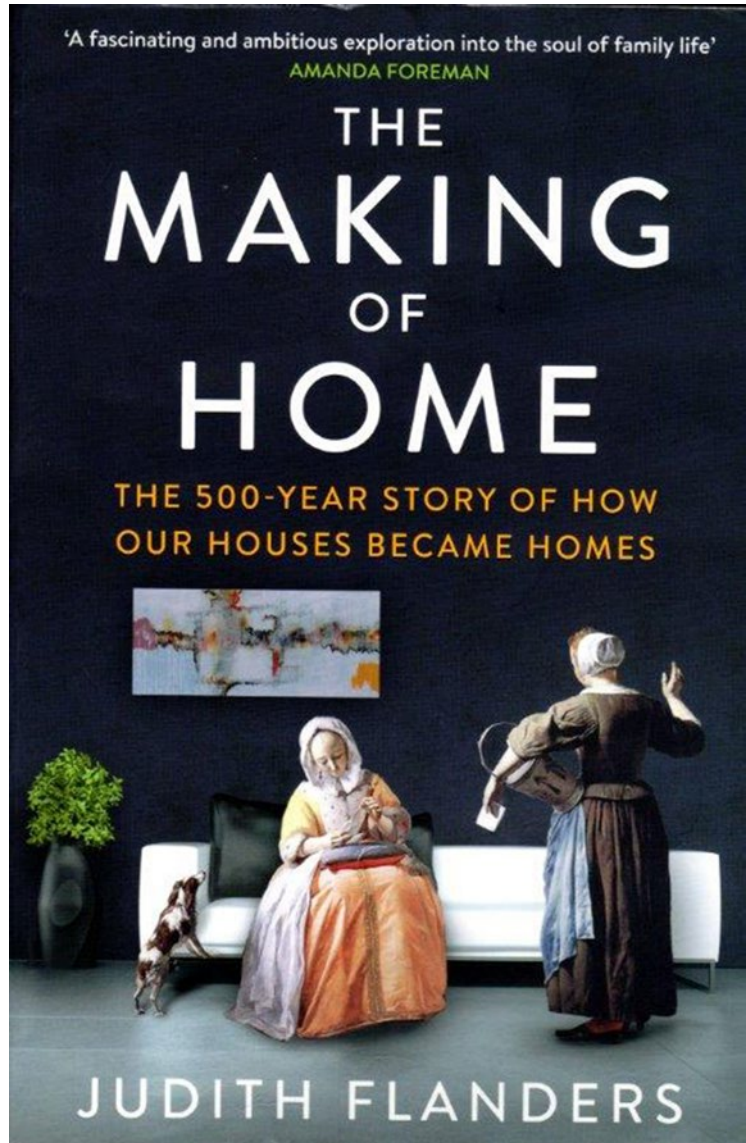
CONCLUSION

The mission of reconnecting two popular subjects of Dutch genre painting which were unique for the seventeenth century to the historic circumstances of their creation does not entail a realistic interpretation per se. Quite on the contrary, in view of the letters a case is made for a reinterpretation of these paintings representing the seventeenth-century version of the Ideal Home from a dominant male perspective, if not the perspective of the male painters.³⁴ The letters written by the seamen's wives revealed that the actual home circumstances were at that time very different from the ideal represented in the paintings. The misunderstanding between the real and the ideal home is part of the Dutch myth of the seventeenth century being the nation's Golden Era. Also, the paintings played a key role in this myth created in the nineteenth century.

Both types of homescapes discussed here, not only the paintings of letter-reading and -writing women, but also the mother-and-child scenes illustrate that there is the depicted historic reality of a female-dominated home and the practice of writing and receiving letters at one hand, but on the other a fair degree of idealization in the depiction of healthy and wealthy circumstances of the women and children. The portrayed 'leisured class' of well-to-do ladies who are seconded by their maid-servants in the act of writing or reading letters is not represented in the selection of transcribed letters. Also the static and often seated posture of the women portrayed within a domestic setting, not only Pieter de Hooch's caring mothers but also the letter-writing and -reading females, suggests a clear separation of spheres between publicly active and therefore absent male bread-winners and static home-bound housewives, which is not supported by the seamen's wives' letters either. While the portrayals of healthy young mothers with their children are contradicted by the many sad letters from the women to their seafaring husbands, the portrayals more closely resembled the ideal-home image of a loving spouse and healthy children waiting for his return as expressed in the seamen's letters.

Figure 7

Cover of Judith Flanders's, *The Making of Home* paperback edition, Atlantic Books 2015, designed by Ghost.



Although the critical view of art historians on the deceptive realism of the paintings might point to a solely material interpretation of the seventeenth-century ideal home, while the captured correspondence between Dutch seamen and their families at home warrants a wider interpretation of the concept of the ideal home, which stresses the emotional and convivial dimensions of the home. It is more than plausible that the soothing function of the ideal-home images as represented by the paintings was triggered by the real situation, in which both men and women longed for a family life of health, wealth

and happiness, and time to enjoy them. In view of the contents of the women's letters and the historic reality of seamen's wives who had to cope on their own during the long periods of their husbands' absence, the widely accepted notion of seventeenth-century Holland as the cradle of female domesticity, needs to be reconsidered. The curious fact that the ideal-home images, more in particular the subjects of letter-writing and -reading females and the intimate mother-and-child scenes are missing in eighteenth-century genre painting strengthens the case of their compensatory function which seems to have become superfluous in the eighteenth century.

NOTES

1. An elaborated version of the lecture "17th-Century Ideal Homes in Letters and Paintings: A New Combination of Sources" as an invited speaker in the Histories of Home Series at University College London, December 7, 2016, and May 6, 2016 at the conference "*Ideal*" homes? *A History of the Home* at the London Municipal Archives.
2. The letters were captured during the Anglo-Dutch wars between 1652–1654, 1665–1667, 1672–1674, and 1780–1784.
3. According to Loughman (2014: 83) this type of paintings became fashionable in the mid-seventeenth century, which correlates with the dates of the first letters captured.
4. My initial interest in the letters was focused on potential expressions of homesickness in the seamen's letters (Cieraad 2016b). When I came across the more numerous seamen's wives' letters in the publications of the Sailing Letters-project my own perception of the nation's glorious Golden Age which too was shaped by the period's iconic paintings, started to shift. The shift happened without pre-meditation. Also my initial ideas on seventeenth-century family relations changed when reading the letters, for I was struck by the importance of single family homes instead of the expected three generation households. For instance in one of the letters a young seaman's wife apologizes to her husband when she cannot afford the house any longer and had to move in with her mother. Further research from different angles will be necessary in reaching well-founded conclusions.
5. De Mare claims that they represent first and foremost painterly exercises and explorations in expressing the nature of materials within the spatial frame of constructed and carefully composed interiors (2012: 60, 354–364).
6. In origin seventeenth-century paintings had no titles, but they have been endowed with plain descriptive titles in the

- latter half of the twentieth century. Also dating of the painting was not customary, and experts sometimes disagree about the time of creation (Waiboer 2012: 126–127).
7. Still in the iconographic interpretation all depicted letters primarily qualify as love letters, also on the ground of the popular manuals for writing love letters published in the latter half of the century.
 8. Dutch title "Al zyt ghy vert, noyt uyt het Hart" in Jan Harmensz Krul (1634), *Minnebeelden: toe-ghepast de lievende ionckheyt*.
 9. In a letter dated 1779 a wife writes to her husband "although I don't see you, you are always in my heart" (Van der Wal 2010: 115).
 10. Original Dutch: "Ende ghij schriefft mij, dat ghij het kussen ter nacht als ghij in de koeij sijt in de arm neemt ende dat ghij u dan inbeelt of ick bij u mijn alderliefste ben ende dat ick, schrief ghij mij, oock soo moet doen. Maer het is als vergeefs gedaan. Moeten met lidtsaemheijt de tijt wederom verwachten."
 11. Original Dutch: "Wijffje lief, ick wens altemet in mijn selve dat UL. altemet een nachje bij mijn mocht wesen om wat te praete (...) Ick denck noch altemet om het letste nachje doen wi bij malcander sliepe."
 12. Original Dutch: "(...) wat hebben wij met ons vrienden te doen, want moeten wij samen gheen heuys houden. Wandt vrienden die sleuyten wij beuyten de deur de een soowel als de ander als wij tesamen tevrede ben dan is 't al wel. Want vrienden sullen ons niet geven als wij niet en hebben."
 13. Original Dutch: "(...) om van u, mijn alderliefste, niet lanck te blijven, want mijn hart soo seer naer u en onse twee lieve cinderen verlanckt, dat mijn dunckt eens thuis gecomen te wesen sulcken langen reijs niet meer aen te vaarden daer men onder sulcke langen verbintenis staet. (...) Hiermede eijndige ik en bevele u mijn alderliefste in de beschermingh van Godes met ons twee cinderen, die u en mijn een lanck, saligh leven wel verlene en mijn bij u weder gesont brengen, zodat wij bij malcanderen en met vreugden onse teijdt versleijttten, dat tot saligheidt mach strecken en tot grootmaeckene van onse cinderen. Geef se toch altemet een soen van haer vader en als ick bij u gecomen sal wesen, sal der u duisent in de plaets geven" (Van der Wal 2008: 39–40).
 14. There are some paintings of a letter-writing man, like Metsu's "Letter-writing Man" which is thought to be the pendant painting of "Woman Reading a Letter"(Sutton

- et al. 2003: 126) There are even less paintings of a letter-reading man. In both cases, however, the letters have not been interpreted as love letters, as would be expected. In a poem by P. Hondius dated 1621 an older man relishes the aspect of his collection of letters he received from all over the world (ibid. 32).
15. The economic historian Jonathan Israel is the first making a connection between Dutch painting and the shifts in the Dutch maritime economy: "It has never been practice among art historians to link the upsurge of Dutch painting in the 1590–1620 period with the rise of Dutch primacy in high-value commerce (...) to link the general austerity of Dutch painting of the 1621–46 period with maritime recession (...) to link the reversion to grandeur, complexity and opulence in art in the period 1646–72 with the culminating epoch of Dutch primacy in world trade at precisely this time (1997: 472).
 16. Original Dutch: "En steurt mijn oock wat mois en wat catoen, dan sulle wij sien dat wij een Ostiniens vaerder toe een man heb" (Van Megen 2006: 37).
 17. The East Indian Trading Company (VOC) was founded in 1602 and had offices (so-called chambers) in six towns in the west of the country: Amsterdam, Delft, Middelburg, Enkhuizen, Hoorn and Rotterdam.
 18. Maps, however, are never represented in the paintings of letter-writing women, probably because the sender does not know the location of the addressee, while in Metsu's painting "Man writing a Letter" a globe is represented, suggesting that the writer is aware of his location.
 19. This painting is also known by the title "Woman Nursing an Infant, with a Child and a Dog."
 20. In his Amsterdam period De Hooch painted not only "Man Reading a Letter to a Woman" (1674–76) or "Young Woman in an Interior, Receiving a Letter" (1668–70), but also "Woman Reading a Letter and a Man at a Window" (1669), "Interior with a Woman Reading and a Child with a Hoop" (1662–66) and "Woman Reading a Letter" (1664).
 21. Paintings as wall decoration appear more frequently in De Hooch's Amsterdam period.
 22. For instance Emanuel de Witte is accused of portraying in his painting "Interior with a Woman at a Clavichord" (1665) an unrealistic view into a sequence of marble-floored rooms across the hallway. The suggested depth is highly unlikely considering the narrow width of most seventeenth-century Dutch houses (Flanders 2015: 5–7, plate 2).

23. These home inventories were legal documents stating the value of each individual object within the rooms of the house, in order to create equal shares between legal heirs, or creditors. As a primary source probate inventories are of indispensable value to historians interested in material culture.
24. De Hooch painted in 1655 "The Bringer of Bad News," which portrays a messenger who has handed a letter to a couple of whom the woman is in tears. In the same year Jan Steen's painted a rich Delft merchant who sits in front of his house while being addressed by a begging woman and child, which is definitely a more realistic portrayal of the actual situation in the seventeenth century (Schama 1987 cover image).
25. Original Dutch: "Ick most onse sooen op der vaert sende want ick konde hem de kost niet langer geve ende hy is noch soo jonck, hy is maer 9 jaer oudt. Denckt eens wat een verdriet het myn is sulcken jongen kint te (laten) varen (...)."
26. The first epidemic was in 1624, the second in 1635 and 1636, the first war with the English lasted from 1652–1654, the third and most devastating epidemic was from 1663 till 1665, followed by the second war with the English from 1665 till 1667, and the most disastrous year 1672 when the country was invaded by French and German armies and the third war with the English started and lasted till 1674 (Van Gelder 2008: 11; Van der Wiel 1996: 53).
27. Wikipedia lists the paintings of Pieter de Hooch more or less in order of creation.
28. Original Dutch: "Ende oock soo ben ick oock ser bedroeft om onsen soon, want het is mijn so eenich, soodat ick het mijn bemynde alderliefste niet schrijven en kan. Want als ick noch aen hem gedenck, soo is of mijn hert in mijn lif kapot (...)."
29. Original Dutch: "Doe je wegh trock lietje ons met 5 maer nu maer met ons 3. En godt weet of het daer noch bij blijft (...) want wij dit alles wel verdient hebben met onse sonden." (in Van Megen 2006: 42–43).
30. Brenner compares the probate inventories of Haarlem in two periods 1605–1624 and 1645–1650 and finds a remarkable increase of genre painting (scenes from daily life) and land- and seascapes, but also a remarkable decrease of biblical scenes. Loughman and Montias, however compare the total number of paintings and their location in the house between 1600–1639 and 1640–1679.

31. Not only less known eighteenth-century Dutch painters like Abraham van Strij, Jan Ekels and Willem Joseph Laquy, but also more famous French painters were inspired by Dutch seventeenth-century genre painting (Borzello 2006: 22–23; Waiboer 2012: 158). The Amsterdam Rijksmuseum recently obtained a work of the eighteenth-century Geneva painter Jean-Étienne Liotard, titled "Dutch Girl at Breakfast," which is clearly inspired by Dutch seventeenth-century genre painting. See also the electronic Codart eZine (#4 Summer 2014) on eighteenth-century Dutch art.
32. In eighteenth-century Dutch painting men are portrayed behind writing desks exemplifying their profession as administrator, architect or scholar, and Persian carpets have been relegated to the floor. The more distinctive exotic feature is the presence of a beautifully dressed black boy (Pijzel-Dommissie 2001: 233, 254–255; Koldewey 2001: 307, 310, 312, 321, 339).
33. Aono (2011: 128) in her focus on the imitations of Dutch genre painting in the eighteenth century states that eighteenth-century Dutch artists and art collectors were aware of the grandeur of the "past Golden Age." Among the few Dutch artists that imitated there will certainly have been admiration for the old masters, but the appreciation of French and later English collectors must have been bigger which explains why so many seventeenth-century Dutch paintings, also most of Metsu's ended up abroad (Waiboer 2012: 148–149).
34. Judith Leijster was the only female master painter in the first half of the seventeenth century. Her main genre subject was the portrayal of men, often soldiers. She did not paint mother-and-child scenes, nor letter-writing females or males.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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