

Tell Don't Show

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Interiors in the Era of Covid-19

Interior Design between the Private and
the Public Realms

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Tell don't show: The invisible plague in Dutch seventeenth-century paintings of the domestic interior

Irene Cieraad

Throughout most of the seventeenth century plague epidemics raged through Dutch cities and took their toll in an enormous loss of life. However, seventeenth-century paintings of domestic life do not show the sorrow or the death toll, but portray healthy, thriving mothers and children in sunlit interiors.¹ The sunny imagery of the seventeenth-century painting is so strong that it defies the historic reality of the countless plague victims. In a strange contradiction, up until today the Dutch language harbours numerous references to The Plague, or *pest* as it is called in Dutch. My perception of the glorious Dutch Golden Age, and the sunny imagery of seventeenth-century interior paintings in particular, changed after reading the published transcripts of seventeenth-century Dutch letters written by women to their husbands at sea (Van Gelder 2007).² What struck me most were the women's heart-breaking accounts of the loss of children due to The Plague. I have since tried to detect evidence of this daily reality in the paintings, given that art historians have warned against their deceptive realism (Cieraad 2016, 2019). According to Wayne Franits, it lures contemporary viewers into believing that the paintings represent slices of daily life in the seventeenth century (2004: 1–2).

In the future, art historians might face similar challenges relating the contrasting realities of the sunny interior photographs of family togetherness in lockdown with the distressing images of Covid patients in intensive care

units (ICUs). Also, images of Covid patients isolating or recovering in their home environments might not be recognizable as such. Judging by their titles, no seventeenth-century Dutch painting is known to depict plague patients at home, but Covid-19 encourages a reflection on the representation of The Plague by Dutch painters at the time.³ Gabriel Metsu's paintings *A Sick Woman and a Weeping Maidservant* (1657–59) and *The Sick Child* (1664–66) are now interpreted, considering their dating, as likely depictions of plague patients (Waiboer 2012: 69, 129).

The only known painting that explicitly illustrated the horrors of The Plague was commissioned by the governors of the Leiden plague hospice, a so-called pest house, to decorate their trustees' room (Figure 11.1). Pest houses were erected outside the city walls to isolate and contain plague patients who did not have any family members to take care of them. In showing the fatality of the disease, the painting is very instructive. Most prominent are the symptoms of bubonic plague, but invisible is the suffocation due to pneumonic plague. However, when the painting was ready in 1682 there seemed to be no need of a pest house anymore.



FIGURE 11.1 *Painting by Theodoor van der Schuer, Pest Victims in a Pest House 1682. Museum De Lakenhal, Leiden.*

Also, Hendrick ten Oever's painting, dated 1670 and situated in Zwolle, a town in the east of the Netherlands, was most probably commissioned by the governors of an orphanage to decorate their trustees' room (Figure 11.2). It shows the exteriors of the private houses of plague patients, which were marked with a white cross painted on their façades. This so-called *pestkruis* had to warn potential visitors and passers-by to keep their distance in the same way as housemates of plague patients had to carry a white stick in public, not only as a warning to keep a safe distance, but also to be used as a pointer for the products they wanted to buy. Around 1650 it was common knowledge that The Plague was an infectious disease spreading not only



FIGURE 11.2 *Painting by Hendrick ten Oever, The Slaughtered Pig 1670. Collectie Overijssel, Zwolle.*

through the air, but also through materials which had been in contact with an infected person (Noordegraaf and Valk 1996).

The disastrous consequences of the plague epidemics were more explicitly documented in drawings and etchings, which show corpses piling up in the streets and queues of funeral processions. However, in contrast to oil paintings, drawings and etchings were never used as wall decoration, but stored in albums. The watercolours made by Gesina ter Borch, the sister of the well-known painter Gerard ter Borch, which represented the death toll in her native town Zwolle, not only the deadly attack of a skeleton on a sweet little girl, dated 1656, but also the watercolour titled *Death at Ramshorst* (1660), are just one example (Figure 11.3). The affluent ter Borch family owned the Ramshorst mansion outside Zwolle, and like other families fortunate to own a countryseat, they fled the plague-invested city. But the watercolour shows that even the mansion was not a safe place. Death, in the guise of numerous skeletons, kidnaps dinner guests, who struggle to free themselves. Not only the view through the door, but also the drawing on the wall on the left of the picture, depict funeral processions. Skeletons are traditional symbols of death, while hourglasses, like the ones depicted on the floor, are so-called *vanitas* objects which carry the symbolic message 'remember (sooner or later) you will die' (Cheney 2018: 267).



FIGURE 11.3 Watercolour by Gesina ter Borch, *Death at Ramshorst* 1660. Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

Other references encoding the transience of life in seventeenth-century paintings are less known. For example, the children who inflate a pig's bladder in Hendrick ten Oever's painting symbolize the shortness of life as only a breath (Figure 11.2). Equally, the knitting of the adolescent girl that can be undone by simply pulling the thread represents the fragility of life. Knitting was at that time a craft mainly performed by orphaned girls. The slaughtered pig hanging on the ladder is a reference to death and dying. Slaughtered pigs or oxen were favourite subjects of painters during the plague epidemics, often in combination with children inflating a bladder. The presence of a broom in combination with the described objects, which either refer to death, The Plague,



FIGURE 11.4 Painting by Samuel van Hoogstraten, *The Slippers* 1658. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

or life's fragility warrants, in my opinion, a related symbolic interpretation. In this interpretation the broom is key to the introduction of the concept of a liminal object as a boundary marker, in this case between life and death.

In my search more specifically for paintings of the interior which encode in the painted objects similar references to the transience of life I came across the intriguing painting by Samuel van Hoogstraten, titled *The Slippers* (1658), which creates the illusion of a view into an interior without anybody present (Figure 11.4). Not only does it prominently feature a broom leaning next to the doorpost, but also more liminal objects are visible, such as shoes, a door mat and a bunch of keys. In combination with the *vanitas* objects of an extinguished and leaning candle, a dark mirror and a closed book I want to make a case for a symbolic interpretation of the painting which points to the death of a housewife. The concept of the liminal object, however, is not restricted to the past but is also very useful in elucidating crucial objects in the current Covid-19 pandemic.

Telling letters, symbolic paintings

The letters from the women left behind to their men at sea shed light on the life histories of seamen's wives who had to cope financially and emotionally with the hardships of being lone mothers and wives in the rough times of plague epidemics. Most moving are the letters reporting the deaths of children due to The Plague. Such as a young mother describes her deepest sorrow on the death of her boy: 'My dearest and beloved husband I am so sad about our son's 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). In a letter dated 1664, a mother vividly describes the suffocation of her little girl due to pneumonic plague folded into a report of the general situation in Amsterdam: 'People are dying quick. One week alone between ten to eleven hundred people died, however with God's help it has been reduced to 445 this week. God our Lord has torched the fire of pestilence in our house and took our Anna within two days ... And only God knows if our suffering is enough for we are clearly punished for our sins' (Van Gelder 2008: 82–6). The end of the letter presents a common understanding that The Plague was a punishment of God.

Although the pestilences were seen as God's punishment they did not lead to biblical subjects of hell and damnation in the paintings (Loughman and Montias 2000: 54–5). On the contrary, the rise of genre paintings indicated a clear need for distraction, from naughty brothel scenes and jocular inn scenes to sunlit interiors of a mother nursing her child, a posh woman in the company of her maid, or simply a sweeping maid. The realism of seventeenth-century

Dutch paintings is a highly debated topic. Regarding the painters' omission of the sad reality of The Plague as described in the letters, this is certainly true. The numerous genre paintings which, according to the probate inventories and the accounts of foreign visitors decorated the interior spaces of Dutch houses in the seventeenth century, leave an impression of a nation desperately seeking distraction (Borzello 2006: 21).

For most art historians there is no reason to assume that Samuel van Hoogstraten's painting *The Slippers* (1658) would fall into another category than distraction (Figure 11.4). Van Hoogstraten, who at the end of his career wrote a book on the art of painting, stated that the work of a painter is to trick the viewer into believing an optical illusion (Van Hoogstraten in De Jongh 1976: 14–6). In the case of *The Slippers* he was creating the illusion of not only different materials, such as the leather upholstered chair, the satin tablecloth and the shiny tiles, but also of a view into several interior spaces. By the painter's artful brushstrokes and clever composition, the viewer believes that they are peeking through open doors into three interior spaces distinguished by different flooring. The beholder's view is directed to a partly visible painting on the wall of the interior which represents the painting *Woman Reading a Letter* created three years earlier by his contemporary Gerard ter Borch (Oczko 2021: 197–9). Copying a painting of a colleague into one's own work was not uncommon and is interpreted by art historians as a fraternal wink, but there is more in it than meets the eye.

Despite van Hoogstraten's realism in masterly representing different materials from the leather chair to the twig broom, the painting is misleading in its suggestion of the three linked spaces, which do not represent a common spatial arrangement in Dutch seventeenth-century houses.⁴ As one of the very few paintings of interior spaces without human presence it has intrigued many viewers and led to different and often opposing interpretations, from a view into a brothel to a representation of a domestic interior of an absent but chaste housewife (Oczko 2021: 199–200; Kloek 2009: 75). In attempting to connect this painting to the historic reality of The Plague and the death toll it took, my interpretation will radically differ from previous ones.

In search for clues, I will start with the broom as the connecting object between Hendrick ten Oever's painting in which the broom is depicted next to the *pestkruis*, and Samuel van Hoogstraten's painting in which the broom is leaning next to the doorpost. A semiotic reading reveals that this interpretation connects with the iconographic tradition in explaining seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting, and in particular the work of the art historian Eddy de Jongh (1976). I will expand this interpretation by introducing the anthropological concept of the 'liminal object' (Thomassen 2015). By focusing on the depicted objects and their meaning I hope to move closer to the seventeenth-century layman's interpretation of this painting.

The broom and other liminal objects

The broom's omnipresence in Dutch seventeenth-century genre painting is the topic of a recent book by the Polish art historian Piotr Oczko (2021), who understands the broom as an emblem of the Dutch culture representing domestic and moral cleanliness as performed in the ritual act of sweeping (2021: 407–11). Contrary to Oczko, I will stress the multifaceted meaning of the broom as a boundary marker which divides and unites opposites, not only inside and outside, but also clean and dirty, good and evil.⁵ While sweeping away the dirt the broom as a cleaning instrument becomes at the same time dirty. Oczko stressed only the broom's positive metaphorical meaning of moral cleansing, while its opposite meaning of evil, in the sense of satanic defilement and as a vehicle of witches, was as much alive in the seventeenth century (Vervoort 2011).

Samuel van Hoogstraten painted in *The Slippers* the twig broom as a liminal object used to mark the boundary between two spaces with different degrees of interiority (Figure 11.4). The outer door (indicated by the handle on the right) opens to a space with a red and black tiled floor, which gives the impression of a scullery in the back of the house, separated by another door (indicated by a simple ring handle on the left) from a passageway laid with terracotta tiles. The concept of the liminal object is also helpful to describe other objects in the painting such as the doormat, the bunch of keys and the so-called slippers, which are in fact women's shoes only to be worn outside the house. The wooden soles of these shoes (*trippen*) would damage the fragile marble floor of the furnished room, like the coarse broom of twigs would never be used to sweep marble floors.

While the broom essentially marks the boundary between inside and outside, both the shoes and the doormat are indicative of a higher level of interiority.⁶ Ever since the seventeenth century doormats have been used in front of entrance doors as interior markers of boundaries into representational spaces with more delicate flooring. As a liminal object the doormat serves to collect the dirt from shoes and keep the marble floor clean. Shoes are also liminal objects in keeping the feet clean and collecting dirt on their soles.

Samuel van Hoogstraten, the master of illusions, might suggest the following story: the woman of the house forgot something and hastily returned home leaving all the doors open. She kicked off her shoes, left her bunch of keys in the keyhole in order to relock the door within the minute after slipping into her shoes again and closed the doors behind her. In this narrative the beholder stands outside waiting for her return and is allowed to get a peek into the best room of the house. But on the symbolic level of the objects prominently displayed in *The Slippers* the painting tells another story.

The broom, in combination with the clean white cloth, reinforces the opposites of purity and dirt, of moral cleanliness and sinfulness. However, the depiction of a large white cloth on the foreground is very unusual. As Samuel van Hoogstraten was familiar with Catholic paraphernalia the white cloth and the keys will also be interpreted with Catholic iconography in mind.⁷ In that vein the white cloth seems to be a reference to one of the medieval symbols of Mary's purity (Cieraad 1997: 14). The symbolism of the cloth, in combination with the broom seen as a primary boundary marker, not only between inside and outside, but also as inferred from Hendrick ten Oever's painting – also about life and death – leads to the Catholic interpretation of the deceased's passage to heaven (or hell) via the intermediate space of limbo. It explains the unusual arrangement of spaces characterized by different flooring. The intermediate space laid with terracotta tiles and marked with the liminal objects of the doormat and the shoes indicates a boundary with a space of higher interiority which needs to be opened by a key.

Not only is the dangling bunch of keys a symbolic reference to the woman of the house as the traditional key keeper, but a key is also a liminal object in its dual function of locking and unlocking, of closing and opening doors, and in allowing or inhibiting access. Within Catholic iconography, however, the key is the symbol of Saint Peter who opens the heavenly gate only to the morally just. Adding to my symbolic interpretation of the painting are the *vanitas* symbols of an extinguished and leaning candle and a closed book which occupy the centre of the image (De Jongh 1967: 20). Van Hoogstraten played with Gerard ter Borch's painting *Woman Reading a Letter* which he only partly depicted. The invisible part of ter Borch's painting includes the same silver candlestick with a leaning candle that is depicted next to a small dark mirror.⁸ By adding the enlarged part of the dark mirror above the two *vanitas* symbols van Hoogstraten conveys, in my opinion, the passing of the woman of the house. The view through the open 'gate of Heaven' into a sunlit interior expresses the hope for the woman's peaceful rest. As such this painting would have presented a soothing image in times of The Plague.

Conclusion

The letters emphasize the grim daily reality in the seventeenth century when many plague epidemics struck the country. Holland was at that time the most urbanized part of the world, and like any infectious disease, The Plague spread easily in densely populated areas. The rich tried to escape the plague-infected cities, but as Gesina ter Borch showed in her watercolours, nobody was safe. Drawings, etches and watercolours documented the horrors, but were put

away in albums, while canvases of different sizes and subjects were common wall decorations in all main rooms of the house. Especially the popularity of paintings of healthy women and children in a peaceful domestic setting seem to emphasize a need for distraction. Their compensatory relation to the historic reality of epidemics and wars in the seventeenth century may explain why these subjects no longer featured in eighteenth-century painting.

Not only a similar need for distraction in the present Covid-19 pandemic, but also more similarities with The Plague epidemics has engendered a curiosity about the impact of the pestilences on seventeenth-century society. My knowledge of the letters made me search for more hidden references to death and bereavement in paintings of domestic scenes. In that search Samuel van Hoogstraten's intriguing painting *The Slippers* came to the fore. Not only did he depict a domestic interior without human presence, but also his foregrounding of the broom directed me to make a link between the broom depicted next to the pest cross in ten Oever's painting.

The broom, in combination with several *vanitas* objects in the centre of the painting, convinced me of a symbolic interpretation of the painting which concerns the passing of a housewife. It is uncertain if she died from The Plague, but the dating of the painting makes it plausible. Like all symbolic interpretations my interpretation is speculative, but with solid foundations in anthropological literature on liminality. With the broom as key in my definition of the liminal object, which is not only a boundary marker but also a union of opposites, three more objects in the painting have been identified as liminal: the shoes, the doormat and the bunch of keys.

My symbolic interpretation of *The Slippers* may seem farfetched, but we must realize that religion, whether the Catholic or the Protestant faith, was the dominant ideology and concerns about the afterlife were often more compelling than those about daily existence. According to the iconographic tradition in art history, seventeenth-century beholders were able readers of the symbolism of not only daily objects, but also *vanitas* objects, as well as religious iconography. The relevance of the symbolism in seventeenth-century paintings for today's beholders may be minimal, but the concept of the liminal object has as much relevance now as it had then in pointing to critical boundaries.

In these pandemic times there are liminal objects which point to the critical boundary of a Covid-19 infection. A perfect example is the face mask which protects people against an airborne Covid-19 infection and marks the critical physical boundary of nose and mouth. When in use the mask is clean on the inside but potentially dirty on the outside by the blocked virus particles. Also, the disposable gloves and aprons worn by medical staff when treating Covid-19 patients point at the critical boundary between health and a potentially deadly disease. In uniting the opposites of clean and dirty, present-day liminal objects

such as face masks, gloves and aprons are disposable, which mark a fast transgression of the critical societal boundary between new products and waste.

Notes

- 1 In their assumed depiction of reality these Dutch paintings have played a crucial role in the modern historiography of home and domesticity (Flanders 2015).
- 2 These letters, locked away for centuries in the British National Archives, were once found on Dutch ships captured by the English in sea battles (1652–74) between the two nations, which were simultaneous with the last three epidemics of the century (Van Gelder 2008). References to all publications on the transcribed letters are in Cieraad 2019.
- 3 In origin seventeenth-century paintings did not have titles but were endowed with descriptive titles in the nineteenth century.
- 4 Another painting, titled *View into a Hallway* (ca. 1662), also presents an uncommon arrangement of interior spaces, but in this case we know that it was used to surprise the guests of his London client Thomas Povey who had put the painting behind a closet door (Oczko 2021: 196).
- 5 Oczko does not discuss Hendrick ten Oever's painting.
- 6 The broom seems a common painterly object to alert seventeenth-century beholders of a view into the interior.
- 7 Although registered as Protestant (Dutch state religion), he depicted the Catholic rosary as celebration of the Blessed Virgin Mary twice during his stay in Vienna, most prominently in Feigned letter rack (ca. 1655) in possession of Prague Castle Picture Gallery, which gives the impression that he secretly converted to Catholicism.
- 8 Research indicated that van Hoogstraten copied the original, gloomier version of Gerard ter Borch's painting, which was later on brightened up by changing amongst others the red tablecloth into a colourful Persian tapestry (Oczko 2021: 198–9).

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