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Время выполнения задания –120 мин., язык – английский, русский.
Максимальное количество баллов – 100.

I. Прочитайте статью Роберта Болдвина «Любовные письма у Вермеера и Терборха» (Baldwin R. V. Love Letters in Vermeer and Ter Borch.2002. Retrieved from: https://www.socialhistoryofart.com/essaysbyperiod.htm

II. Дайте развёрнутые ответы на русском языке на следующие вопросы:

1. Под влиянием каких факторов в нидерландской живописи XVII в. возникает мотив любовного письма?
2. Какие методы истории искусства изучают эти факторы?
3. Каков был социальный и культурный статус частного письма в Нидерландах XVII в.?
4. Кто, по мнению автора, является зрительской аудиторией картин, изображающих любовные письма? Какие значения, образы, ценности транслировались ему с помощью этого мотива?
5. О каких изменениях в голландском и — шире — европейском обществе свидетельствует распространение в живописи сюжетов и образов, связанных с мотивом любовного письма?

Robert Baldwin

Love Letters in Vermeer and Ter Borch

Introduction

It is a truism that Dutch seventeenth-century art focused on a wide array of ordinary Dutch subjects including middle class portraits, contemporary interiors (rustic, burgher, and courtly), still-lives of Dutch meals, cityscapes, church interiors, taverns, brothels, farms and gardens. Although most of these mundane subjects appeared elsewhere in seventeenth-century French, Italian, and Spanish art, the triumph of a vernacular social reality was reserved for the Dutch republic as the only country where middle-class citizens ruled themselves.

With the exceptions of cityscape, and, to a lesser extent, church interiors, no subject in art was more distinctively Dutch in the seventeenth century than the writing or reading of letters. Although known in the first half of the century, the theme of the letter achieved real popularity only in the second half of the century as Dutch burgher culture embraced a broad spectrum of courtly subjects tied to refined leisure, aesthetic cultivation, beauty, and love. Along with music and amorous conversation, the love letter was the most common subject in the art of Ter Borch, Vermeer, Metsu, and van Mieris. Although letter writing and reading continued as an occasional subject in eighteenth-century French art (along with the other domestic themes first widely painted by Dutch artists), it never regained the popularity it enjoyed in the Netherlands between 1660 and 1690. Thus the story of the love letter as an artistic theme offers a revealing case study in Dutch burgher culture during the seventeenth century.

Since the 1980s, scholars have suggested a variety of historical factors for understanding the new artistic subject of the love letter. These contexts include mercantile seafaring and the absence of many Dutch men from home, letter writing as literacy and calligraphic skill, letters as marker of high social status amid widespread burgher social climbing, [i] and letters as feminine identity. After reviewing the first two contexts, my essay looks more closely at the last two. On the one hand, we will see how the love letter was but one of many courtly subjects widely embraced by Dutch burghers after 1660. On the other, we will show how all of these subjects of refined leisure served to "feminize" Dutch culture by redefining traditional burgher values of work, family, and civic engagement with a new civilization of refined, feminine leisure. (A parallel feminizing dynamic worked within seventeenth-century court culture but that is beyond the scope of this essay.) Although my discussion of gender recognizes patriarchal values in Dutch paintings of letters, I believe also see a proto-feminism in the art of Ter Borch, Vermeer, and a few other Dutch artists who focused heavily on women. These painters used the theme of "feminine" leisure and letters to dignify female consciousness and experience and educate male viewers in an ennobling, feminine civilization.

In the longer historical view, these artists contributed significantly to a larger shift seen In European culture between 1300 and 1800, a shift from timeless religious, mythological, and historical themes favored by religious and courtly elites to the modern subjects of private life first developed by the late medieval aristocracy and then

taken up more aggressively and in more prosaic terms by the middle class after 1600. As a subject tied to a new privacy and psychological interiority, the Dutch love letter contributed to this larger shift from public to private, heroic to everyday, political to domestic, aristocratic to bourgeois. It was the spread of Dutch and Flemish scenes of everyday life throughout burgher and aristocratic art in the eighteenth century which generated an unprecedented common culture, largely shared by burghers and aristocrats, which focused on private life and individual sensibility.

The Dutch Mercantile Economy and the Absent Husband

In a country where much wealth came from overseas trade and at a time when most business was family-operated, the Dutch merchant was a traveler protected by Mercury, the god of commerce and travel. Historians estimate that ten per cent of Dutch men were abroad at any given time in the seventeenth century. [ii] Since letter writing was the sole means of communication at that time, we can see modern Dutch commerce as an important social requirement for the rise of the love letter in art after 1630. As scholars have noted, some Dutch paintings make this explicit by showing absent Dutch husbands writing letters to their wives back home with pendant pictures of wives reading these missives. In Metsu's pendant paintings, *Man Writing a Letter* and *Woman Reading a Letter* (1662-1665), an elegant, wealthy burgher man sits at a beautiful writing desk, penning a letter to his wife. In the companion piece, she reads his letter while a maid looks at a seascape, underscoring the husband's absence. Similar seascape or map imagery – referencing absent loved ones - appears prominently in other paintings of women with letters by Dirk Hals, Netscher, Musscher, De Hooch and Vermeer. [iii]

Despite occasional references to husbands away on business, the vast majority of Dutch paintings depicting letters have nothing to do with Dutch mercantilism or the business travels of Dutch men. After all, Dutch merchants had been travelling extensively since the early days of mercantilism in the late Middle Ages but the letter theme only arose after 1630 and achieved real prominence between 1660 and 1690. Dutch travel was far more important for Dutch seventeenth-century seascape and landscape than it was for the theme of letters. It is also worth noting that travel was almost as common elsewhere in seventeenth-century Europe yet no other country took up the artistic theme of letters. Although Dutch travel probably contributed to the rise of paintings depicting letters, it was not the primary factor.

Letter Writing as Dutch Burgher Literacy and Inner Nobility

Far more important, as Peter Sutton has noted, was the rapid rise of literacy among Dutch burghers after 1550 and the growing expectation that educated burghers should master the art of well-written letters. Following the example set by French authors in 1550, Dutch writers began publishing manuals on letter writing complete with sample letters in a variety of categories (business, complimentary, condolence, love). [iv] As always in matters of Renaissance literature, these authors stressed the authoritative example set by classical authors whose letters were widely published in Renaissance editions. Needless to say, the well-written letter followed a set of literary rules and social conventions which, among other things, favored impersonal language, decorum,

and an awareness of class and rank. The following comments on literacy complement the ideas set forth in Sutton's discussion in ways which deepen our understanding of literacy, class, and burgher social identity in Dutch paintings of letters.

[……]

As the only burgher republic in seventeenth-century Europe, the Dutch were surrounded by courtly societies which disdained the "sordid" world of economic pursuits and passions. Like their counterparts in the burgher republics of late Medieval and early Renaissance Italy, Dutch burghers pursued education, literacy, and cultivated leisure as the defining signs of an inner nobility set proudly within a social cosmos dominated by the aristocracy. Thus paintings of letter writing worked, in part, to advertise a new, national pride on Dutch cultural and social accomplishment. During the first half of the century when Dutch political, religious, and cultural identity was still characterized by a widespread hostility to courtly values (following their war of independence against courtly Spain), the letter theme was not pronounced in Dutch art. Nor were other themes tied to court culture except for the love garden. It was only after 1650 that a later, wealthier generation of Dutch burghers began looking beyond narrow, regional identity toward a more international, cosmopolitan culture shared with the aristocracy. It was only then that the love letter emerged as a major theme in genre painting.

Calligraphy and Fine Writing

Ann Adams has also discussed the social status attached to the fine art of calligraphy as another factor in the rise of the Dutch love letter painting. [v] She notes the popularity of printed calligraphy manuals between 1590 and 1640, Dutch calligraphy contests, and the decoration of Dutch homes with framed sheets of fine calligraphy as described in contemporary inventories. (She does not explain the absence of such sheets from the hundreds of thousands of Dutch paintings depicting Dutch homes). [vi] She also cautions viewers from projecting modern ideas of privacy and individuality onto the more impersonal, socially defined world of letter writing at a time when few letters were truly private, when letters were frequently read aloud, and when men often wrote letters with publication in mind. Although this discussion of calligraphy sheds some light on paintings depicting the writing of letters, it says nothing about images where letters are read. Nor does it get at the heart of why letters became popular in Dutch art in the second half of the century at a time when the vogue for handwriting manuals was over.

The Letter as Dutch Burgher Refinement, Leisure, and Courtly Love

In my view, the most important historical development for understanding Dutch paintings of letters was the growing aristocratization of Dutch burgher culture after 1640. [vii] Frequently discussed in the literature on Dutch culture and art since the late 1980s, [viii] the aristocratization of Dutch culture moved away from traditional burgher values of work, family, moderation, and thrift, to embrace a courtly world of refined

leisure in courtly conversation, poetry, music, dance, beauty and fashion, pastoral, and letter writing. [ix] We could just as easily call this the feminizing of Dutch burgher culture insofar as women traditionally ruled over this domestic world of refined leisure from the moment it was invented in the chivalric courts of the late twelfth century. In a social universe which assigned political, military, and economic activities to men, high-ranking noblewomen generally ruled over the private world of refinement, beauty, poetry, manners, conversation, and love. It was the rich and powerful Lady Idleness who allowed the Poet-Lover into the courtly garden at the beginning of the *Romance of the Rose* (1237). [x] And it was the Duchess of Urbino who presided over the elegant discussions of all manner of courtly topics in Castiglione's canonical *Book of the Courtier* (1528) after the duke retired for the night, fatigued with the labors of government. The feminizing aspect of this refined leisure focused on conversation, beauty and courtly love is explicitly addressed by Castiglione's male speakers who insist, unconvincingly, that these activities are compatible with the traditional masculinity exemplified by Achilles, Hercules, and Socrates. Translated into most European vernaculars except Dutch by 1570, Castiglione's handbook finally appeared in a Dutch edition in the 1660s just when Dutch burghers were going courtly. [xi]

Gendered Writing: Masculine Books vs. Feminine Letters

On the one hand, letter writing and reading was commonly practiced by educated men and women in late Medieval and Renaissance Europe. And Dutch art often showed men, as well as women, with letters. On the other hand, Dutch depictions of women writing or reading letters carried a different set of associations and values tied to the "feminine" world of emotion. While men were not excluded from the world of amorous letters, male writing in general was more likely to be tied to "masculine" mind, in line with traditional gender roles while female writing was easily categorized within the stereotype of "feminine" feeling and the body.

In Western culture since classical antiquity, literary and intellectual activity was traditionally gendered as masculine. Gender hierarchies also operated within literature itself. The most celebrated literary efforts were geared to the "masculine" public sphere of printed books and public letters tied to a higher civilization: philosophy, science, history, religion, ethics, and so on. Women were largely excluded from higher education and from the male-dominated world of public literary discourse which routinely ridiculed female writers through the late nineteenth century. (Despite such institutionalized prejudices, a growing number of educated women wrote a wide range of books on serious topics after 1350.) [xii]

Male literary culture tolerated female writing in the sub-literary world of private letters geared to personal experience and feeling. Male letter writing, in contrast, generally aimed at public audiences, as in the epistles of Biblical writers (Paul), classical philosophers (Cicero), medieval theologians (Jerome), or Renaissance humanists who published volumes of letters (Petrarch, Bruni, etc.). Generally written in Latin, these letters were short essays on lofty spiritual, political, moral, and scientific issues. With the rise of printing, male intellectuals like the humanist, Erasmus, wrote thousands of pages of learned letters with eventual publication in mind.

At the same time, Renaissance artists circulated new images of the scholar in his study, almost always a man. Between 1450 and 1600, most of these images depicted famous Christian scholars such as St. Jerome where humanist intellectual activity could appear with a pious cloak.[xiii] While pagan scholars also appeared, as in Joos van Ghent's "portraits" for the studiolo of the Duke of Montefeltro (1460s), classical philosophers and portraits of contemporary scholars only emerged as a common theme after 1600. Examples include Rubens' *Four Philosophers* (ca. 1611) and his *Portrait of Jan Govaerts* (1627); Thomas de Keyser's *Portrait of Constantijn Huygens* (1627), astronomers painted by Dou (c. 1665) and Vermeer (c. 1668), Dou's many intellectual self-portraits, and Netscher's intellectualized portrait of the art collector, *Abraham van Lennep* (1672). The scholarly study even infiltrated still-life painting, at first cloaked in the pious rhetoric of vanitas but eventually finding a secular pride in Hoogstraten's trompe l'oeil still life depicting his literary publications (1662). No artist took up the theme of the male scholar as frequently as Rembrandt. His many scenes include *St.* P*aul in His Study*; *Self-Portrait as Paul; "Faust" in His Study; Matthew writing the Gospel;* the generic depictions of scholars in the Hermitage and the Stockholm museum, and *Ansloo and His Wife.*

In the world of art, the female scholar was practically nonexistent and usually appeared with imaginary woman from the classical past such as Rembrandt's *Minerva in Her Study* (1630s). Old, pious women and widows appeared reading Bibles in Dutch seventeenth-century art [xiv] but none of these women were credited with writing anything. At best, the old woman reading her Dutch Bible learned from the world of wise men while updating in modern Protestant terms the late medieval tradition of female domestic piety and devotional reading. [xv]

Female Writing: The Private World of the Letter

The same patriarchal culture which celebrated the Latin letters written by philosophers, theologians, and scientists such as Jerome and Galileo also allowed women to practice a vernacular letter writing geared to private themes of love, delicate emotion, and personal experience. Dutch Baroque artists made this clear in a variety of ways. Some paintings underscored intimacy and love by depicting curious spectators peeking over the shoulder of the woman reading or writing. Other paintings featured prominent beds or amorous paintings hanging on the walls or seascapes to imply the absent husband. Even solitary women writing or reading were connected to implied men through the letter itself. The motif of reading by an open window also implied the absent lover while heightening the sense of "female" domesticity, privacy, and intimacy.

Letter Paintings as Fantasies for Male and Female Viewers

Most of these paintings focused on one type of contemporary Dutch woman who was repeated from image to image: young, beautiful, upper-class, and richly dressed in silks and satins. For male viewers, depictions of beautiful young Dutch women with love letters offered appealing fantasies of nubile romantic partners, all the more available in the many paintings where the obliging maiden looks out smiling at the real viewer (Hals, Netscher, Metsu, Van Mieris, Steen, Vermeer). [xvi] In such works, the maiden either

writes amorously to the male spectator or receives his letter with evident pleasure. It is easier to see how these paintings cater to male fantasy when we return them to Dutch homes already crammed with images of beautiful young women in pastoral landscapes and portraits, genre paintings, gardens and merry companies, mythological scenes, classical history, and Biblical romances.

Since the early sixteenth century, female beauty had become a self-sufficient subject in European court art with no other justification or narrative needed. Indeed, to a certain extent, it was the primary theme in thousands of paintings, prints, and ceramics with the changing particulars of subject matter only adding an intellectualizing and legitimizing overlay of moral, historical, and literary significance. The same sixteenth century court culture produced a new literature focused solely on female beauty, elaborated in book length treatises and praised in long speeches as the most perfect reflection of the divine order in the terrestrial sphere. Of these texts, none was more widely known or more influential than the humanist oration on female beauty which concluded Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*.

Through the mid seventeenth century, much Northern European burgher art preferred to moralize or even demonize female beauty as sinful, dangerous, deceptive, and emasculating. With some important exceptions in pastoral, gardens, and mythology, most Dutch art of the first half of the seventeenth century moralized female beauty as *vanitas*. After 1660, things changed dramatically with the comprehensive embrace of courtly values. Just as Dutch still-life shifted from *vanitas* (dominant before 1640) to luxury still–life celebrating beautiful and expensive things (after 1660), so Dutch burgher depictions of beautiful woman replaced vanitas with unambiguous celebration of female pulchritude, seen most clearly in Ter Borch and, in a more poetic manner, in Vermeer. It was the 1660s generation of artists which first made love letters a central theme in Dutch art, in part as a subset of the larger category of female beauty.

Dutch paintings of women with letters also flattered female viewers in different ways with appealing self-images of education, courtly refinement, and fulfillment in love. Here we might note the importance of servant girls included in many of these scenes. At a time when most Dutch servants were illiterate, the inclusion of female servants in Dutch paintings of letters sharpened the "noble" qualities of the ideal Dutch burgher woman. In Dutch art, the handmaiden can deliver the letter, or wait patiently to take it away when finished, or look idly out the window as in Vermeer's *Woman Writing a Letter with Her Maidservant* (Dublin). The one thing she cannot do is read or write such letters herself. Nor can she appreciate their polished, formal rhetoric or understand the literary references and codes found in all educated writing. In Vermeer's *Love Letter* in Amsterdam, the broom waits in the foreground for the maid while the richly dressed lady of the house holds a lute, emblematic of her high mind, musical knowledge, endless leisure, and wealth. [xvii] In these paintings, the upper-class Dutch female viewer lives, quite literally, inside the work itself, immersed in a world of music, literature, fashion, and art (shown hanging on the walls). Confined to a material substratum of work and bodily labor, the servant girl flatters the upper-class female viewer with a social antithesis, a servile and obedient Other. In that's sense, servants and letters both go together as markers of class.

The narrow range of women seen in Dutch paintings of letters emerges more clearly when we look at the wide array of body types, ages, and clothing seen in Dutch paintings of men reading or writing letters. While marriage and love informs some of these paintings, there is much less of an emphasis on outward beauty and romance. It was no accident that Dutch artists played up the theme of the beautiful Bathsheba with the letter from King David commanding her into his bed while ignoring the theme of David writing his letter.

The Feminine Letter as Female Dignity and Male Education

It is all too easy, and quickly rather tedious, to recognize patriarchal values of male mind and female body/feeling in Dutch paintings of women writing letters. This is, after all, an old dichotomy which goes back to classical antiquity and continues into the later twentieth century. While it seems impossible to dismiss this approach to Dutch paintings of love letters, additional approaches allow us to move beyond the static gender stereotypes and binary oppositions favored by social art history in the early days of the 1980s and 1990s. .

Let me suggest a very different approach which sees Dutch letter paintings as expressions of a new proto-feminism giving dignity to female writing, "feminine" feeling, and, more generally, to (upper class) women as a whole. From this perspective, Dutch letter painting in the 1660s didn't just encourage burgher men to fantasize about romantic possibilities and to define their masculine identity against feminine subjects. In my view, it also transformed burgher masculine identity in ways which had long been underway in court society since the thirteenth century as seen in the highly refined and feminized noblemen praised in the *Romance of the Rose*, in Gottfried's *Tristan and Isolde* (c. 1210), in the hundreds of illuminations of the *Manesse Codex* (c. 1300) and in the Limbourg Brothers' *Très Riches Heures* (c. 1415). While burgher culture worried about the Power of Woman in the late fifteen and sixteenth century, court culture had long celebrated female power in the sphere of love, manners, and cultivated leisure. The best example, perhaps, is the *Lady and the Unicorn* tapestry cycle at the Musée de Cluny. [xviii]

If late medieval court culture shows a broad feminizing trend as court literature focused increasingly on "feminine" love, delicate feeling, and polite wooing in the ideal nobleman, late Medieval culture also moved after 1300 into a new world of bodily and affective spirituality with a decided focus on female subjects, above all the Madonna. [xix] For all of the important contributions made by late medieval female writers, this was less a woman's spirituality aimed at women than a universal Catholic piety transforming the lives of all Christians, male and female. Although bodily religious feeling suffered an abrupt setback in Protestant lands, it was extended in Counter-Reformation Catholic culture through the eighteenth century and explains the new "piety of ecstasy" seen everywhere in Catholic Baroque art. We might better understand the complexities of Dutch love letter paintings as feminist images educating and transforming male viewers if we make a general comparison with Bernini's *St. Teresa in Ecstasy*. With its moaning female saint swooning on her back while penetrated by a male deity and observed by flanking noblemen and religious officials from the Cornaro family, Bernini's sculpture offers a compelling image of powerful men and male-controlled institutions defining women in traditional terms of feeling and the erotic

body. Yet the real novelty of Bernini's art is the way he helped make "feminine" ecstasy into the norm for all saints and religious subjects in Catholic art, especially male subjects. By 1650, Catholic Baroque art is full of male saints moaning, swooning, writhing horizontally, and succumbing to ecstatic penetration (Francis, Sebastian, Jerome, Paul, Bernard, Ignatius).

For a closer comparison to the shifting gender values in Dutch letter painting, one can cite Dutch images of mothers nursing their children, some of which show a similar quietude and introspection. Images like De Hooch's *Nursing Mother* (San Francisco), Rembrandt's etched *Holy Family* (1654) and Ter Borch's *Mother Tending a Sick Child* bespeak a new *masculine* awareness of female emotional experience and the private, largely invisible rewards of parenting which were increasingly visible in Dutch art. Here we need to look beyond the more obvious patriarchal family values structuring these images to see their more subtle and innovative qualities, especially the new value and dignity given to emotional bonding and parenting. While these paintings put women in the restricted domestic space described by Dutch male writers as a happy cage or prison, they also opened up new spiritual and psychological spaces where men could learn "feminine" virtues of compassion, patience, nurturing, and family obligation. Even as these paintings defined women narrowly as mothers, they also transcended static gender roles by quietly encouraging Dutch men to be fathers in ways not seen anywhere else in Europe. It was Dutch men, after all, who were known for fussing over their children and displaying an unusual fondness in front of visitors. The same Dutch men (and women) also created the theme of the good father by investing in a wide array of Biblical subjects including Tobit and Tobias, Abraham Embracing Isaac (Lievens), Christ and the Children, and the Return of the Prodigal Son. While one tends to credit eighteenth-century artists such as Greuze with inventing the theme of the good father, it was actually invented a century earlier, largely in Dutch religious art but also in some genre scenes such as Ostade's etching, *Father Feeding a Child*. [xx]

Pictorial Devices and the Dutch Love Letter as Inner, "Feminine" Space

Returning to Dutch paintings of love letters with fresh eyes, we might see in those works which attempt to explore a private female psyche signs of a new masculine attention to an inner world of feeling previously overlooked and ignored. This is particularly true of paintings focusing on a single letter writer without the anecdotal drama of curious onlookers or attending servants. In Ter Borch's *Woman Writing a Letter* (The Hague) and Vermeer's *Woman Reading a Letter* (Dresden), our attention is concentrated on a solitary woman absorbed in the silent act of writing or reading. Both artists used geometric compositional structures to suspend outer action even as a quietly activated atmospheric light heightened both the stillness and the inwardness of the female subject.

This suspension of outward drama allowed the paintings to suggest a richer and more subtle inner life of female thought and feeling poured out into the letter in Ter Borch or activated by the experience of reading in Vermeer. The open lips of Vermeer's woman suggests the powers of speech as if the woman were quietly reading the letter aloud. Letter and reader are caught up in a private conversation all the more alive because the painting ignores the real spectator. [xxi] The psychological distance between painted

woman and real spectator was essential to imaging her private consciousness, hidden and inaccessible yet all the more vital and present for its simultaneous distance and intimacy. To heighten this distance and the psychological life it suggested, Vermeer placed the woman at some length from the beholder, her body shrunk down in a larger perspectival space and blocked off from any physical access by the carpeted desk sealing off the foreground.

The woman's profile position facing an open window turns her further away from the real viewer and from the "window" of the picture plane. Though the open window reflects a frontal view of her face, the dimness of the reflection prevents us from seeing or knowing anything more about her. Nor can we catch her eye as in so many sixteenth and seventeenth-century paintings of *Venus at the Mirror* (Titian, Veronese, Rubens, Vouet) or depictions of ladies at their toilette where mirrors reflect the feminine gaze outward. The ghostly reflection in the window of Vermeer's *Woman Reading a Letter* (Dresden) simultaneously heightens our sense of the hidden persona of the woman reading while conjuring up the intangible presence of the letter's author as another spectral presence.

Vermeer also distanced the woman from the real spectator by introducing a quiet trompe l'oeil curtain in the foreground which avoids the rhetoric folds, detailed illusionism, bright color, and clever self-referentiality of similar curtains in Dutch art at this time. Hanging more quietly over the picture "window" than the red curtain pulled back over the real window inside the room, the trompe l'oeil curtain invites the viewer to peep all the more quietly and attentively into this moment of female interiority. In the end, we engage with the solitary woman in a way which mimics and participates in her own intense engagement with her absent lover. The beloved's physical absence only heightens his strong emotional presence, activated by the letter, by the reader-writer, and for the real viewer, by the painting itself which we study and reread repeatedly.

Returned to their original settings in small, busy Dutch homes, these quiet paintings worked a little like depictions of church interiors to draw viewers away from their mundane domestic lives and material concerns into a poetic world of private feeling "ennobling" love, and "feminine" consciousness. And like other genre paintings depicting elegant Dutch burghers conversing, wooing, and playing court music, the images of love letters invited burghers to study, comprehend, and absorb as part of their own social education and refinement, their own civilizing process. And because this is the arena where women have long been said to rule, the depiction of refined leisure offers a feminine school where men are civilized, where men learn what women already know to a greater extent. He peers in silently, able to see in part because he remains unseen, He is able to hear largely because his own voice has been silenced. Instead of simply imposing himself on the painted woman as an object of male fantasy, the male viewer respectfully observes and listens and learns. Whether the painted woman reads a letter or writes one, she becomes the author for the male spectator. In turn, he becomes her reader, her student.

Words and Images: The Feminine Letter as an Aesthetic Model for Dutch Burgher Art

In the best letter paintings by Vermeer and Ter Borch, the viewer sees, or rather, feels the woman's personal absorption through the stillness of the composition, the quiet play of the light, and the subdued glow of the colors. As we have noted, other artistic decisions heightened the rich interiority of these paintings and the viewer's secret participation including the focus on single, absorbed figures, the suggestion of inner voices through parted lips, the psychological distance of figures set in profile and carefully positioned behind spatial barriers, and the use of trompe l'oeil curtains or doorways (Vermeer's *Lady with a Maid,* Amsterdam).

The size of these paintings is particularly important as most are small enough to allow one or two viewers at most. Some including Ter Borch's *Lady Writing a Letter* (The Hague) are not much larger than the letters they depict. Here the aesthetic stillness and inner radiance transforms the experience of viewing the painting into something akin to the quiet absorption which it depicts. Unlike most of their contemporaries, Ter Borch and Vermeer possessed the artistry necessary to respond more deeply to the new subject of female letter writing. They fashioned a distinctive letter painting imbued with a groundbreaking emotional absorption, subtlety, richness, and intimacy. The painting becomes letter-like in its own visual intimacy, privacy and intense communion with another human being. In this sense, there is no great difference between the woman carefully writing with her quill in Ter Borch's panel in The Hague and the artist carefully "writing" with his brush. Indeed, Ter Borch seems to have conflated the two by signed on her writing. (Question unanswered for the moment: Did Dutch painters sign love letter paintings on the letter itself the way they signed paintings of amorous musical scenes on the music sheets?)

At the same time as Dutch art seems to have imitated the privacy and intimacy of the love letter them in its own aesthetic qualities, one might also argue that images surpassed words in some important ways. In a world where even love letters were highly formalized according to set literary codes, the visual representation of love letters allowed for a greater sense of intimacy and individual human presence. In an anti-rhetorical art prizing a silence eloquence, on the one hand, and a detailed description, on the other, Dutch seventeenth-century artists far surpassed the letter and gave audiences a more fresh, direct look at human consciousness which literature would not develop until the next century.

The Letter Theme in Dutch Art as Sign of a Larger Shift in European Culture

In classical antiquity, the court writer, Ovid, had already written a famous book of fictional love letters between ill-fated lovers such as Penelope and Ulysses, Paris and Helen, Theseus and Ariadne, Hero and Leander, and Dido and Aeneas.[xxii] To a large extent, Ovid's *Heroides* reinforced patriarchal literary values, in part by transforming private female letters into public "masculine" literature but also by inscribing his own values onto ostensibly female voices.

At the same time, Ovid's *Heroides* blurred the boundaries between serious literature and private letters. Already in the late middle ages, Ovid's *Heroides* inspired court writers

like Machaut, Froissart, Charles d'Orléans, Christine de Pizan (d. 1429) and others to write epistolary poems or incorporate numerous love letters into courtly romances to bring them alive with a new subjectivity. [xxiii] The *Heroides* was even more familiar in the sixteenth-century thanks to printed translations. Inspired loosely by Ovid, Marguerite de Breier (using the pen name, Helisenne de Crenne), published an autobiographical book, *Les Epistres familieres et invectives* (1539) composed entirely of letters. [xxiv]

Seventeenth century writers, male and female, heightened the authentic subjectivity of the letter as a literary device by downplaying the speech-like qualities of earlier fictional letters and inventing language tied more closely to distinct, individual voices. Male epistolary writers secured a greater authenticity in matters of love and private emotion by adopting a female voice. In *Les Lettres Portugaises* (1669), the Count de Guilleragues writes on a wide range of amorous topics through the mouth of a Portugese nun abandoned by her lover. [xxv] It was the growing status of "private" epistolary writing in seventeenth-century high culture which helped fuel the emergence of the lady and the letter as an important theme in Dutch art.

All of these paintings of letters need to be seen against the larger cultural changes brought to European art by Dutch burgher culture. By making female letter writing into a new and substantial subject, Dutch art expanded the range of genre painting to include new levels of human experience previously neglected as trivial. In this sense, the letter theme typified the larger contribution of Dutch burgher culture to seventeenth-century European culture as a whole with its decidedly courtly orientation and its heroic public sphere. At the same time, we might also note how Dutch burgher culture worked in tandem with seventeenth-century court and religious art at a time when all the visual arts expanded the representational range of humanity and human experience. One might cite the humanizing of church art seen in Caravaggio or Murillo, the humanizing of mythology seen in Rubens and Carracci, or the rise of new more mundane categories of art* such as still-life, even in courtly culture.

Tied to private experience and personal emotion, the letter signaled a broader shift in European consciousness away from the heroic, the sacred, the princely, and the public toward the private, the individual, and the ordinary (burgher). This is the same shift between history painting and genre (everyday life), and between Latin and the vernacular. Seen against a larger field of historical change, the Dutch seventeenth-century letter theme was an important precursor to the new, eighteenth-century literary form of the novel. It was no accident that the novel drew on earlier epistolary writing and that one of the earliest novelists, Samuel Richardson, wrote two novels, *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747-8) composed entirely of letters written by female protagonists. When the most innovative, serious literature pioneered by male writers breaks new ground by adopting the voice of the solitary woman writing a series of private letters perused secretly by the reader, the traditional gender hierarchies of Western literature were crumbling. The same shift appears in an earlier stage in Dutch seventeenth-century culture, both before 1660 when genre painting focused on mothers and the feminine domestic interior, and after 1660 when Dutch artists explored the feminine arena of refined leisure and courtly sophistication. In the end, Dutch Baroque art gave new value and dignity to "everyday" burgher women by making them a principal subject for the first time in Western art. In doing so, it advanced the possibility that the greatest artistry could focus on private female sensibilities far from the grand

and public world of history painting with its heroic, rhetorical dramas performed largely by and about great men.

The Fusion of Court and Burgher Culture in the Dutch Love Letter

One intriguing question remains which helps us understand the curious fusion of courtly and burgher in later seventeenth-century Dutch art. If Dutch burgher culture popularized the love letter theme at the moment when Dutch burghers embraced a rich spectrum of courtly values, why was the love letter theme not found in court art of the sixteenth and seventeenth century? Here we confront the paradox of a courtly theme invented by burgher society as it took on courtly airs. We might be able to resolve this paradox if we recognize the decorum observed in most, though not all, Dutch depictions of love letters. To be sure, some paintings of women with letters depict courtesans, prostitutes, and loose women (including Bathsheba as interpreted by Jan Steen). Yet most genre painting depicting love letters from the 1660s and 1670s select virtuous, properly-dressed, upper-middle class Dutch maidens

[i] See Peter Sutton, Lisa Vergara, and Ann Adams, *Love Letters. Dutch Genre Painting in the Age of Vermeer*, Greenwich, CT: Bruce Museum of Arts and Science, 2003, esp. p. 32, where Sutton comments, "*The writing of private letters had previously been a pastime and token of the upper classes, especially in France, where the practice of writing personal letters was first refined and codified. The ability to compose a good letter was likened to the mastery of the art of conversation and became one of a series of prerequisites for admission to refined, upper-class society*." On p. 18, Sutton also notes the innovations of Ter Borch's paintings – "more than mere illustrations of the upper-class social life in Holland that was increasingly influenced by French manners. They offer richly suggestive narratives and invite the viewer into a conspiratorial participation in a mostly feminine world, intimate and leisured."

Sutton's essay offers the best overview of the letter-writing theme in Dutch art. Drawing on earlier scholarship going back to the late 1970s, he discusses the explosion of letter writing in the seventeenth-century, mercantile travel, literacy, professional secretaries, French and Dutch letter-writing manuals, the organization of the Dutch mail service, and the use of messengers. He also mentions the rise of the epistolary novel in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe without discussing the thematic and aesthetic parallels with Dutch letter paintings. Although he touches on the social status attached to literary and letter writing and the attempts by Dutch painters to use letters to create psychological interiors, he offers only a broad overview. He mentions but does not explore issues of class nor does he explore the "feminine" gender values implicit in the shift of Dutch burgher culture from work, family, and civic patriotism to refined leisure, love, and beauty.

[ii] See Sutton, et al, op. cit., pp. 27-28.

[iii] See the examples in *Love Letters*, op. cit., pp. 16, 80, 83, 109, 119, 128-129 (Ter Borch's pendant pair), 175, 179, 185. Other paintings of letters depict soldiers far from home. See *Love Letters*, pp. 95, 97, 100

[iv] Sutton, op. cit. pp. 14-15, 26-28, 32-34, with valuable bibliography on these popular letter-writing manuals on p. 48, notes 31-33. Sutton cites the following studies: Bernard Bray, *L'Art de la letter amoureuse des manuel aux romans (1550-1700)*, The Hague and Paris, 1967; Janet Gurkin Altman, "The Letter Book as Literary Institution, 1539-1789: Towards a Cultural History of Published Correspondences in France," in *Yale French Studies*, 71, 1986, 17-63; W. van den Berg, "Briefreflectie in briefinstructie," *Documentieblad* 38, Feb. 1978,

1-22; Katherine Hornbeak, "The Complete Letter Writer in English, 1568-1800," *Smith College Studies in Modern Languages*, 15, 3-4, 1984.

[v] Ann Adams, "Disciplining the Hand, Disciplining the Heart: Letter-Writing Paintings and Practices in Seventeenth-Century Holland," in Sutton, et al, *Love* Letters, op. cit., pp. 63-76.

[vi] The importance attached to framed calligraphy is not supported by Dutch paintings depicting Dutch homes. Only a few paintings depict paper with elaborate writing and these seem more like moralizing inscriptions added by the artist (such as Steen and Ostade) than records of calligraphy in interior decoration.

[vii] See Pieter Spierenburg, *Elites and Etiquette: Mentality and Social Structure in the early Modern Netherlands*, Rotterdam, 1981. The social-climbing French bourgeoisie is discussed in George Huppert, *Les Bourgeois Gentilshommes: An Essay on the Definition of Elites in Renaissance France*, Chicago, 1977. The broadest discussion of aristocratization from 1300-1700 is Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing* Process, New York, 1978.

[viii] See Allison Kettering's three articles: "Ter Borch's Ladies in Satin*," Art History*, 16, 1, March, 1993, 95-124; "Gentlemen in Satin: Masculine Ideals in Later 17th-Century Dutch Portraiture," *Art Journal*, 56, 2, 1997, 41-47; "Gerard ter Borch's Military Men: Masculinity Transformed," in Arthur Wheelock, Jr. and Adele Seeff, eds., *The Public and Private in Dutch Culture of the Golden Age*, Newark, 2000. Also see H. Rodney Nevitt, *Art and the Culture of Love in Seventeenth-Century Holland,* Cambridge University Press, 2003.

[ix] These ideas are also taken up briefly in the three essays in *Love Letters*, op. cit..

[x] Here is the passage from Guillaume de Lorris, *The Romance of the Rose*, trans. Harry Robbins, New York: Dutton, 1962, pp. 12-17. The dandified burghers strolling, dancing, conversing, wooding, and making music in seventeenth-century Dutch gardens are the direct descendants of these French nobles through a long line of late Medieval and Renaissance writers.

Full many a time I smote and struck the door
And listened for someone to let me in,
When finally the yoke-elm wicket gate
Was opened by a maiden mild and fair -
Yellow her hair as burnished brazen bowl -
Tender her flesh as that of a new-hatched chick -
Radiant her forehead - gently arched
Her brows - as gray as falcon's her two eyes,
And spaced so well that flirts might envy her.
Her chin was dimpled. Mingled white and red
Was all her face - her breath sweet as perfume.
Of seemliest dimensions was her neck
In length and thickness - free from wen or spot;
A man might travel to Jerusalem
And find no maid with neck more fair and smooth
And soft to touch. Her throat was white as snow
Fresh fallen upon a branch. No one need seek
In any land a lady daintier
With body better made or form more fair.
A graceful golden chaplet on her head
Was set than which no maiden ever had
One more becoming, chic, or better wrought.
Above the polished chaplet she had placed
A wreath of roses fresh from morning dew.
Her hair was tressed back most becomingly
With richest comb. Her hand a mirror bore
Her fair, tight sleeves most carefully were laced.
White gloves protected her white hands from tan.
She wore a coat of rich green cloth of Ghent

All sewed with silk. It seemed from her attire
That she was little used to business.
When she was combed, adorned, and well arrayed,
Her daily task was done. A joyful time -
A year-long, carefree month of May - was hers,
Untroubled but by thoughts of fitting dress.
When thus for me she unlocked the gate,
Politely did I thank the radiant maid
And also asked her name and who she was.
She answered pleasantly, without disdain:
"All my companions call me Idleness;
A woman rich and powerful am I.
Especially I'm blessed in one respect:
I have no care except to tress and comb
My hair, amuse myself, and take mine ease.
My dearest friend is Mirth, a genteel beau,
Who owns this garden planted full of trees

. . .
Here with his friends he joy and solace finds,
For never could he want more pleasant place
Or one where he could divert himself.
The fairest folk that you'll find anywhere
Are Mirth's companions, whom he keeps with him."
. . .
I hope the assembly may not so prevent
Me that I may not see them all today.
I feel I must meet them, for I think
The company is courteous and well taught
As well as fair." Without another word
The gate by Idleness was opened wide;
I entered then upon that garden fair.
When once I was inside, my joyful heart
Was filled with happiness and sweet content.
You may right well believe I thought the place
Was truly a terrestrial paadise,
For so delightful was the scenery
That it looked heavenly; it seemed to me
A better place than Eden for delight,
So much the orchard did my senses please.
. . .
Straightway I found Sir Mirth taking his ease.
With him he had so fair a company
That when I saw them I was amazed
To think whence such fine people could have come;
For, truly, winged angels they did seem.
No earth-born man had ever seen such folk.
This noble company of which I speak
Had ordered for themselves a caroling.
A dame named Gladness led them in the tune;
Most pleasantly and most sweetly rang her voice.
No one could more becomingly or well
Produce such notes; she was just made for song.
She had a voice that was both clear and pure;
About her there was nothing rude, for she
Knew well the dance steps, and could keep good time
The whole she voiced her song. Ever the first
Was she, by custom, to begin the tune;

For music was the trade that she knew best
Ever to practice most agreeably.
Now see the carol go! Each man and maid
Most daintily steps out with many a turn
And farandole upon the tender grass.
See there the flutists and the minstrel men,
Performers on the viol! Now they sing
A rondelet, a tune from old Lorraine;
For it has better songs than other lands.
A troop of skillful jugglers thereabout
Well played their parts, and girls with tambourines
Danced jollily, and, finishing each tune,
Threw high their instruments, and as these fell
Caught each on finger tip, and never failed.
Two graceful demoiselles in sheerest clothes,
Their hair in coifferings alike arrayed,
Most coyly tempted Mirth to join the dance.
Unutterably quaint their motions were:
Insinuatingly each one approached
The other, til, almost together clasped,
Each one her partner's darting lips just grazed
So that it seemed their kisses were exchanged.
I can't describe for you each lithesome glide
Their bodies made - but they knew how to dance!
Forever would I gladly have remained
So long as I could see these joyful folk
In caroling and dancing thus excel themselves.

[xi] Castiglione's book had appeared in almost every other language by 1560.

[xii] Since 1995, the University of Chicago Press has been publishing a variety of works by female authors in a series, "The Other Voice in early Modern Europe." Each volume begins with an overview of women and writing by Margaret King and Albert Rabil, Jr.

[xiii] After 1470, St. Jerome was represented by numerous artists, especially in Northern Europe. These included Carpaccio, Dürer, Cranach, Joos van Cleve, Martin van Romerswaele, and Lucas van Leyden.

[xiv] Wayne Franits, *Paragons of Virtue*, Cambridge University Press, 1993, examples on p. 163, 164, 185,

[xv] One striking expression of this idea appears in a 1525 sermon of the papal humanist, Giles of Viterbo..

The devotion of men has definitely ceased

Like us, the primitive church put much hope in the devotion of women. "Intercede," it said, "on behalf of the devout feminine sex." For the world would be on the way to extinction except for the prayers of women. No matter how often the ship has tossed on the waves and almost foundered, the devotion of women has always been an anchor of hope for it. The distinction we otherwise ascribe to the "just man" - that he is the foundation of the world, the column that keeps it from toppling: men like Noah and Abraham - that attribute we sometimes impute to the devout feminine sex, because that sex is the underpinning which forestalls the collapse of the world. For women are better disposed toward the church, toward prayer, toward tears than men. Men tend to be hardened. By nature, women are more inclined to religion. Now religion is gravely ill. How do we recognize a life-threatening malaise? When a sick person's pulse is too faint to be felt, we know his condition is critical.

Take the church's pulse right now. There is no pulse. Where can we find the hint of a pulse to give us hope? The devotion of women!

Giles continues by discussing the divine model of authority where higher "male" reason governs lower "female" body. See Francis Martin, *Friar, Reformer and Renaissance Scholar*, Villanova, 1992, 321-323.

[xvi] See Sutton, et al, *Love Letters*, op. cit., pp. 83, 115, 135, 139, 163, 169, 181.

[xvii] Her knowledge is underscored by the sheet music in the foreground. The servant fetches what the lady reads and understands.

[xviii] I will be posting on my web site a long essay on gender and class values in this cycle.

[xix] Dante's Divine Comedy combined these trends by redefining traditional monastic spiritual ascent as a Platonic romance, soaked in bodily beauty for all its transcendent rhetoric of immateriality, light, and ascent.

[xx] See my essays on this web site: "The Wisdom of Maternal Love in De Hooch and Rembrandt" and "Greuze".

[xxi] Here I borrow Michael's Fried's idea of "absorption" in Chardin's genre painting. See Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality. Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Berkley, 1980

[xxii] The love letter was even a theme in classical art, as seen in a Roman fresco of cupid delivering a letter to the love-smitten Cyclops, Polyphemus.

[xxiii] Marianna Mustacchi and Paul Archambault, eds. and trans., *A Renaissance Woman. Helisenne's Personal and Invective Letters*, Syracuse University Press, 1986, p. 10, cites Machaut's *Confort d'ami (1356);* Froissart's *Espinette amoureuse* (1372) and *Prison Amoureuse* (1373); Christine de Pizan's Epistre au dieu d'amours (1399), and *Le Livre du duc des vrais amans* (1404; recent English translation by Thelma Fenster, New York, Persea Books, 1991); Charles d'Orléans' *Le Poème de la prison* (c. 1440) and Octavien de Saint Gelais' French prose translation of Ovid's *Heroides* (1493).

[xxiv] For Helisenne, the epistolary tradition and the publication of manuals on letter-writing such as Piette Fabri, *Le Grand et vray art de pleine réthorique…*, 1535, 1539, see Mutacchi and Archambault, op. cit., pp. 8-13. The first English epistolary novel appeared in 1558. See Michael Flachmann, "The First Epistolary Novel: The Image of Idleness (1555)," *Studies in Philology*, 87, 1990, 1-74.

[xxv] I am grateful to my former colleague in French, Constance Sherak, for calling this work to my attention.