The catalogue "Art & Home. Dutch Interiors in the Age of Rembrandt" that accompanied an exhibition in Denver and Newark (2001) is an interesting book, not only for its subject, but also because it refers to two ongoing debates concerning the art of the Golden Age. Firstly, the book tries to embed painting, graphic arts and applied arts in a general but thorough introduction to Dutch art and the culture of the period. The Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam intends to realize a comparable concept in its future galleries and has examined the possibilities in the catalogue "Glory of the Golden Age" and in the book "Dutch Art of the seventeenth century". Secondly, two American and two Dutch scholars have written the catalogue's four essays that precede the 141 entries. This transatlantic co-operation is particularly interesting in the light of the more polemic parts in Westermann’s survey of recent research on Northern and Southern Netherlandish art of the seventeenth century.

"Art & Home" therefore lends itself perfectly to evaluate a way of studying painting and applied arts by viewing and discussing them in close, reciprocal relation, just as it enables to examine differences and similarities of American and Dutch approaches to the book's subject: Dutch interiors in the age of Rembrandt. [1]

In an extensive essay Westermann presents a great number of different works of art and introduces the central theme of the book: the new ideas of homeliness which came into being in the early seventeenth-century, and to which the different arts have contributed [2]. Perry H. Chapmann's essay on the display of privacy in genre paintings offers a more focussed contribution to this subject.

The two other essays are written by the Dutch scholars Willemijn C. Fock and Eric Jan Sluijter. Fock writes about the difference between the seemingly authentic representation of the interior in paintings and the historical facts that can be deduced from a combination with other sources. Sluijter reconstructs the collections of paintings of two wealthy Leiden citizens.

The four essays indeed seem to be guided by different interests spurred by the same
historical material: whereas the Dutch authors are mainly concerned with the reconstruction of a physical reality from archival sources, the American authors are evidently more interested in the historical mentality which they try to reconstruct mainly from contemporary images. The importance of this latter approach is stressed already in the introductory sentence of the foreword: "Art and home: Dutch interiors in the Age of Rembrandt' brings together superb paintings and domestic treasures from the Dutch Golden Age in an illuminating context that focuses on the role art plays in reflecting and shaping cultural values." (8)

Indeed, Westermann and Chapman convincingly show that works of art can reflect cultural values. The iconography, expensive materials and the craftsmanship of the works of applied art display confidence in the various enterprises in which the works once served. They also radiate wealth, often combined with a trust in moral categories such as righteousness and cleanliness. The paintings, with their selection and combination of iconographical motives especially in genre pieces and family portraits, give an idealised image of the interiors that communicates values like the importance of family-union, the family hierarchy or the homely wife, and suggest that wealth and well-being result from proper living.

Evidently, the authors are primarily interested in questions of social history. Both Westermann's and Chapman's texts tend to be more about social changes than about art itself. But the visual material is too limited, one-sided and ambiguous to answer completely the interesting and important social historical questions that are being posed. Furthermore, when discussing the social categories, values and changes Westermann and Chapman base their argument solely on the figures instead of the interior. For example, when discussing a painting by Ochtervelt with a family in a room with an expensive chair, a table covered with a precious Persian rug, a landscape painting above a fire place, two ancestor portraits and a carpet that depicts the Virgin Mary amidst putti, Westermann only states that "each household member acts in accordance with his or her domestic place" (55) and proceeds with the description interpreting each person's actions. By not analysing the interior or its relation to the figures, the author does not clarify what the rendering of the interior contributes to the visual communication of social values.

The second remark in the opening sentence of the foreword - that works of art would shape cultural values - is the other main point of the book. Both Westermann and Chapman repeat it regularly, but they do not indicate how and through which works of art this process takes place and fail to give examples of social values shaped or reshaped through works of art.

Remarkably both Dutch contributions completely ignore this second point, although Sluijter does try to find a relation between religious denomination and the differences in the collections of the Calvinist Le Boe Sylvius and the Catholic Bugge van Ring. In this respect, Sluijter points to the significantly higher number of religious scenes in the collection of Bugge. However, Sluijter also found that most of these paintings were displayed in the attic which was used as chapel. This suggests that Bugge did not regard these works primarily as decorative household goods, like the other paintings, but as objects with a religious function. As such, they hardly illustrate the difference between Le Boe and Bugge as collectors of paintings which were simply meant to decorate homes. Instead, the most important difference between these two wealthy Leiden citizens is that Le Boe acquired a number of valuable pieces of Leiden 'fijnschilders',
while the elder Bugge had a larger collection with a substantial number of landscapes and boorish companies. Sluijter rightly points out that this difference is, paradoxically, due to a similarity: both collectors acquired mainly the works of masters from their own generation.

Fock's essay is a shorter version of a text previously published in Dutch in 'Oud Holland' [3]. She demonstrates that painters of genre scenes tended to render the interiors more costly than they can really have been. By doing so, she shows the unreliability of the depictions, just like Westermann and Chapman did from another angle. Fock's explanation indeed differs from Westermann's and Chapman's as she argues that this idealised image is caused by the artistic surplus value of the intricate perspective of a tile floor, for example, or the painted reflexions on a chandelier while Westermann and Chapman do explain these deviations from reality with the public's desire to see certain social values and ideals. Both explanations are complementary and equally convincing.

Most entries are supplementary to the essays as they often limit themselves to just give the most recent opinions on the objects, even when these have no direct impact on the central issues of the essays. However, a number of works show too little relationship with the main theme. Rembrandt's 'Portrait of a man in a red doublet' (cat. 17a) gives no information about Dutch interiors, about the role of the depicted person in a household or about the function of portraits in interiors. Accordingly, the entry has nothing to say about any of these subjects. Inclusion of Rembrandt's drawings of his household would have been more useful (and the name Rembrandt could still appear in the book's title).

In conclusion, this way of viewing and discussing painting and applied arts together as presented in the essays of Westermann and Fock is more successful than in the above mentioned Rijksmuseum catalogues and deserves to be followed. The different categories of works of art do intensify or correct each other by providing at the same time interesting insights into seventeenth-century Dutch culture. However, it should have been stated more clearly that the extremely precious pieces described in the catalogue were available only to very few and very rich people. They consequently do not reflect the material - and possibly mental - culture of the entire Dutch population.

The American and Dutch contributions are quite different indeed. The way in which the history of mentalities is part of the 'American' texts is not always convincing: complex cultural processes are described too briefly and from a single - art historical - point of view, key statements are repeated but remain unproven, and paintings are given a cultural interpretation on the sole basis of their appearance without confirmation from any other contemporary sources. Fock is evidently interested in another approach, but seems somewhat one-sided in her explanations. This is where Dutch and American interests clearly supplement each other. Sluijter seems to occupy the position of a go-between when he attempts to show a connection between faith and the collection of paintings through a reconstruction of the collections based on archival material. To sum up, "Art & Home" is a rich and up-to-date book. Even if it does not always convince it is clearly an important step towards a meaningful, integrated discussion of painting and applied arts. Furthermore, the book shows that American and Dutch scholars can learn much from each other.

Annotations:

[2] A mistake has been made in the translation of 'stadhouder' as 'city keeper' (24), which suggests a non-existant connection with cities. In reality the 'stadhouder' replaced the souvereign, first Philips II, then the Council of a number of provinces. The mistake also occurs in M. Westermann: The Art of the Dutch republic 1585-1718, London 1996, 21.


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