Detail, cat. 10.2 Frans van Mieris, *Brothel Scene*, c. 1658–9

3.

EMULATIVE IMITATION AMONG HIGH-LIFE GENRE PAINTERS

ERIC JAN SLUIJTER

During the third quarter of the seventeenth century, the most ambitious and talented painters working in the Dutch Republic did not become history painters, as had those of earlier generations. Though some of them painted biblical and mythological scenes at the beginning of their careers, they specialised in rendering beautifully dressed young women and men in wealthy interiors. Rivalry among this small circle of artists resulted in paintings of breathtaking artistic and technical quality. They executed these masterpieces for an elite circle of discerning collectors, who recognised and valued such quality and who bought their paintings for high prices.

Remarkably, the painters from this small group continually repeated the same subjects and motifs. Why did they all depict, for example, men standing behind seated women to pour wine, offer oysters or engage in some other flirtatious activity (e.g. cats 9.1–9.4)? Why time and again did they portray elegant young women receiving, reading and writing letters (e.g. cats 1.1–1.6, 2.1–2.4, 6.2), or sitting and standing before mirrors (e.g. cats 6.1, 6.3, 6.5, 7.1–7.3) or playing keyboard instruments (e.g. cats 3.2–3.5, 4.1–4.3)? Why did they paint so many variations on themes and motifs that had been introduced by Gerard ter Borch and Gerrit Dou in the 1650s? To gain more insight into this phenomenon we have to consider contemporary notions about making and admiring art, and the interaction between artists and connoisseurs in relation to the specific character of these paintings. The artists discussed here painted some of the most expensive works on the market and were not the kind who could do no better than borrow ideas and motifs from others. Neither was this repetitiousness a matter of efficiency to lower production costs, as had generally been the case with much less expensive paintings of merry companies and guardroom scenes by artists of the previous generation, including Dirck Hals, Pieter Codde, Anthony Palamedesz, Jacob Duck and Jan Miense Molenaer.[1]

Repetition of characteristic motifs within the oeuvre of a single painter might be considered a 'branding' strategy to guarantee his paintings would be easily recognisable among works by other artists.[2] This essay, however, is concerned with the repetition of

related motifs by different painters, which, in regard to the artists included in this exhibition, might be called emulative imitation.[3] These painters were clearly familiar with each other's works, which suggests that they competed zealously and intentionally referred to one another's paintings, thereby pointedly challenging a small group of knowledgeable connoisseurs to compare and assess their works.[4] In the early modern period, ambitious artists commonly practised imitation and emulation, but views on these concepts varied and were rarely articulated.[5] In this essay, I seek to clarify what imitation might have meant for these high-life genre painters.[6]

Art historians have traditionally described similarities between paintings by different artists in terms of influence, a concept that tells us little about the artists' motivation or the nature of the similarities.[7] Determining 'sources' for the superficial purpose of tracing stylistic evolution through 'influence' does no more than turn painters into passive recipients of seemingly mysterious artistic forces. Recognising sources, however, remains crucial to the understanding of painters' aspirations and intentions.[8] During their training, they learned through studying and copying prints, drawings and paintings. Thus an artist built up an 'image bank' of forms, motifs, manners and techniques on which to draw when conceiving their own works.[9] The conscious or unconscious choices made using this material could result in something conventional, modestly novel or radically innovative, depending upon individual talents and goals. In order to assess and appreciate what artists sought to achieve, as well as to measure their innovations, art lovers needed to be aware – as do art historians today – of artists' handling of such sources. But this imitative use of resources should not necessarily be called emulative imitation. The latter might be described as a pursuit in which self-conscious artistic rivalry with other artists was paramount. The relationship between imitation and emulation, however, remained vague, and contemporary writers on art struggled with the question of the extent to which recognisable imitation was permissible.[10]

Both conscious imitation and rivalry with predecessors and peers were essential components of the early modern educational system, which was based on theories of rhetoric developed in classical antiquity by writers including Cicero, Quintilian, Horace and Seneca.[11] One learned oration by memorising beautiful turns of phrase and figures of speech from exemplary models, and striving to apply them effortlessly. The next important step was to develop something new out of the gathered materials by thoroughly digesting them and implementing them in accordance with one's own talents.[12] Such methods were applied to prose, poetry and, ultimately, painting. The oft-repeated Senecan simile of bees gathering nectar from a variety of flowers to make honey implied how essential it was that one learned to gather the most valuable elements from exemplary sources for storage in one's memory in order to transform these sources through one's *ingenium* to produce something different and new.[13]

In his *Schilder-Boeck* (1604) Karel van Mander discussed borrowing from others only as part of the artistic learning process. When advising young painters to work hard if they wanted to improve, he advised them to behave like 'thieves' and freely borrow arms, legs, bodies, hands and feet, and to mix these elements well.[14] Learning through *rapen* (gathering), thus, was an inherent part of a painter's training.[15] Once these borrowed elements, which had been acquired through the copying of works by renowned masters, had been successfully assembled into a whole a student had accomplished an important step in the

learning process. Van Mander did not mention surpassing others when using borrowed material during one's artistic training. Nor did he discuss the established painter's attitude towards practices of imitation and emulation; apparently he felt no need to define or explain them.[16] These practices were clearly part of the process of the advancement of great art: his biographies of Italian and Netherlandish painters are full of examples of how renowned artists followed, rivalled and outstripped their masters and others.[17]

The attitude towards imitation and emulation became more troubled as the status of the painter and the role of the connoisseur changed in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Vasari and Van Mander had written in their *Lives* (1568 and 1604, respectively) about the careers and works of renowned painters, thus creating a history of art and codifying a canon of artists who had contributed significantly to the progress of the art of painting. They described standards of achievement, fame and value, and provided examples of many different types of art and models for behaviour, against which new developments could be measured by painters and art lovers alike.[18] Both Vasari and Van Mander repeatedly emphasised the driving force of rivalry and the decisive role of discerning patrons in stimulating it.[19]

A self-conscious type of imitation developed among ambitious artists such as Annibale Carracci, Guido Reni and Domenichino in Italy, and Peter Paul Rubens and Rembrandt in the Low Countries.[20] By choosing elements from the canon and then analysing, digesting and judiciously imitating them, these artists emphatically situated themselves into the history of art. Their work strongly appealed to knowledgeable connoisseurs, who could recognise their innovative handling of these models to create new inventions and assess the place of the artist within this history. This also meant that one became more aware of the limits of imitation, specifically the possibility of being accused of theft.[21] The simile of Aesop's crow was used to illustrate this threat: according to the fable, a crow stole feathers from other birds and prided itself on possessing so many beautiful colours. It became the target of ridicule, however, when the other birds reclaimed their feathers, leaving the crow a plain black bird.

As the canon applied to history painting, these issues would have occupied the minds of painters of biblical and mythological subjects. Other artists, however, would have also felt the anxiety of handling borrowings in the wrong way, especially those who catered to true connoisseurs, who had begun to buy works of art by painters specialised in other fields for rapidly increasing prices. We find this apprehension articulated by Philips Angel in his *Lof der schilder-konst* (1642), a short treatise based on a speech he had delivered to the Leiden community of painters, aimed at confirming the dignity of local artists through somewhat pompous prose. A fervent supporter of the still-youthful Gerrit Dou, Angel considered skilful genre painters to be as admirable as history painters.[22] In his treatise, he presented the proper or improper way of borrowing as a burning issue. He examined the problem in his discussion of sound judgement, which he regarded as one of the qualities required of a good painter.[23] From this passage one may gather that by this time many painters, including Angel himself, considered Van Mander's words as a recommendation to all artists, not merely students. After warning against using material from others and claiming it as one's own, he asked rhetorically if it was not permitted to follow Van Mander's advice. Angel answered that artists may borrow only if doing so brings one's own imperfection closer to perfection; then 'it serves to praise the master from whom it was taken'.[24] However, he also

stated emphatically that everything artists borrow must be incorporated into their work in such a way that it cannot be detected, so that they do not become like Aesop's crow.

This begs the question as to how artists could honour and associate themselves with other painters if their references ought to be disguised. Angel probably meant that borrowed elements should not be conspicuous and that if a knowledgeable connoisseur or artist did discern them he would consider them entirely integrated into the invention. Angel was certainly not talking about intentionally referring to other artists in a recognisable way, nor did he say anything about artistic rivalry, let alone about surpassing one's models through imitation. He simply referred to the conventional practice of judicious use of motifs and compositional elements from admired masters. This is different from the clearly recognisable similarities we see in many works by Frans van Mieris, Gabriel Metsu and Johannes Vermeer, and in later works by Dou and Ter Borch. Yet it seems to be precisely what Dou and Ter Borch did earlier in their careers, when they ventured into a new type of genre painting that proved to be immensely successful.[25]

Angel considered Dou's early works as the apex of artistic achievement. It is clear from his text of 1642 that he neither expected artists to surpass canonical examples nor consciously to situate themselves within a historical development of superior art, as the ambitious history painter Rembrandt certainly did. In the late 1640s and early 1650s, when Dou and Ter Borch moved in new directions, a canon with standards of perfection in the field of genre painting did not yet exist. The themes and motifs they chose were grounded in the pictorial traditions and iconographic conventions of the second half of the sixteenth and the first decades of the seventeenth centuries. Many popular motifs originated from kitchen pieces, print series of the five senses, the times of the year, the four elements, the children of the planets and the virtues and vices after artists such as Maarten van Heemskerck, Maarten de Vos and Hendrik Goltzius. Other motifs could be found in scenes of the prodigal son or feasts of the gods, and in the paintings of merry companies and guard-room scenes from the generation of Dirck Hals, Hendrick Gerritsz Pot, Pieter Codde, Willem Duyster, Jacob Duck, Pieter Quast, Anthonie Palamedesz and Jan Miense Molenaer. This abundant array of visual material constituted incredibly rich sources for Dou and Ter Borch to forge their own type of paintings. Such sources were not, however, benchmarks of excellence and value.

Dou and Ter Borch had realised that with their talent and technical prowess they could create, in the words of Ter Borch's father, 'compositions with contemporary figures' (*ordonantsij van modarn*), which could be appreciated as equally worthy of the attention of first-rate artists and high-class connoisseurs as history paintings.[26] After all, these were also depictions of human figures interacting, for which one had to be proficient in the various 'parts' of painting, as Van Mander had required of ambitious artists.[27] Carefully transforming motifs from older scenes of contemporary people, Dou and Ter Borch developed new types that were pre-eminently suitable for showing off highly refined painting techniques. Thus, they managed to establish new standards of what collectors deemed desirable in a field other than history painting. It is the birth of what Gerard de Lairesse would later call paintings of 'civil and graceful modern subjects' (*het burgerlyk of cierlyk modern*).[28] From the later 1650s onwards, a younger generation of ambitious genre painters could measure themselves against this new canon of masterpieces admired by wealthy collectors.[29]

This younger generation of artists had grown up in a period when the prices of paintings began to diverge immensely. In his description of the city of Leiden (1641), Jan Orlers

proudly informed the reader that Dou's paintings 'were highly valued by art lovers and dearly sold'.[30] Angel mentioned that Dou's first major patron, the collector and connoisseur Pieter Spiering, paid the artist 500 guilders annually, which entitled him to have first choice of his annual production.[31] The huge difference in price a successful artist could command compared to those labouring at the lower end of the market was relatively new. This was the result of the ever-growing divergence in the fame artists acquired. In the open art market, where the production of paintings had expanded enormously in volume and where a bewildering variety of types, subjects, sizes, styles, techniques and quality could be found, fame and reputation became particularly decisive.[32] This leads us to understand Samuel van Hoogstraten's urgent call not only to be a virtuous and skilful painter, but also to find well-disposed supporters 'who spread [one's] fame loudly' (*die hem luidruchtig opschreeuwen*) to actively promote one's art. Without them, he argues, the artist 'will hardly achieve any fame', adding that art lovers are often partial.[33] This idea is substantiated by the fact that cognoscenti such as Pieter Spiering, Johan de Bye, François de le Boë Sylvius and Pieter Claesz van Ruijven owned a large number of paintings by a single artist such as Dou, Van Mieris or Vermeer.[34] The astute connoisseur had become paramount and his role is clearly articulated by Franciscus Junius, who wrote that an artist should paint 'after the liking of accurate and judicious spectators, neither may he thinke himself to have painted well, unlesse skilfull men thinke him to have done so'.[35] A process of 'ranking' occurred that had immediate consequences for the prices artists could ask for their work.[36] Some painters, Rembrandt and Dou foremost among them, managed to obtain celebrity status at quite an early age. They were able to command high sums from a wealthy audience of collectors and could bargain for prices higher than 100 guilders for a painting, sometimes even exceeding 1,000 guilders.[37] Other painters, on the contrary, made high-quality works for 10 to 50 guilders, while a great number had to be satisfied with sums of less than 10 guilders, even a mere 1 or 2 guilders. Evidently, art lovers needed to acquire knowledge about the reputation of artists and the characteristics of their works, and it was crucial to be able to judge quality.[38] One could only learn this through comparing paintings by great artists and discussing them with other painters and connoisseurs.

Visiting painters' studios or art dealers' shops, calling on owners of well-known collections and going to auction sales would have become an accepted practice, not only in one's own place of residence but also in other cities of Holland. From the few surviving diaries of art lovers we know, it appears this was easily done. The French connoisseur Balthasar de Monconys, for example, hopped from one city to another every day, visiting artists and collectors seemingly without making appointments.[39] The same is true for Pieter Teding van Berckhout, a regent from Delft, who visited many studios of well-known artists in different cities. For the latter it seems to have been an accepted activity for a man of his standing, as he appears never to have bought anything.[40] Monconys saw works by Vermeer in Delft and was shocked by the high price of 600 guilders for a painting with only one figure. He was just as indignant when he saw in the following days a painting by Dou with one figure for the same sum, a work by Van Mieris valued at 1,200 guilders and a painting by Pieter van Slingelandt for 400 guilders. Naturally, he would have compared the different qualities of the paintings in relation to the artists' reputations.

In such an atmosphere, painters who worked primarily for a small group of wealthy collectors would have expected their works to be measured against those of their peers by

knowledgeable connoisseurs who enjoyed discussing quality and style. By using similar themes and motifs and by referring to admired predecessors and contemporaries, painters actively provoked evaluation and debate about different properties of painting. While such connoisseurs' debates were never written down, Samuel van Hoogstraten and Franciscus Junius's publications offer glimpses into the issues they discussed.

Van Hoogstraten was a painter of this younger generation. During the first half of the 1640s he learned his art as Rembrandt's pupil in Amsterdam and in the late 1660s he ventured into the field of high-life genre painting himself (FIG. 19). In his *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst* (1678), Van Hoogstraten forcefully conveyed notions about the need for rivalry and the urge to surpass one's masters and all others.[41] He would have already been confronted with such ideas during his time in Rembrandt's studio, because, as a young artist in Leiden, Rembrandt had been exposed to discussions about art by men of letters, including Constantijn Huygens, Petrus Scriverius, Theodorus Schrevelius and Jan Orlers.[42] Moreover, at the time of Van Hoogstraten's training in the early 1640s, Junius's learned *Painting of the Ancients* (1637, 1638 and 1641) would have been the talk of the town among the Amsterdam intellectual and artistic elite. Until then, Van Mander's *Schilder-Boeck* had been the only major treatise on painting.[43] In essence, Junius's book is an assemblage of quotations about painting from Greek and Roman authors, but Junius also applied many textual fragments from rhetoric to the art of painting, changing, for example, 'orator' into 'painter' in quotations from Cicero or Quintillian.[44] Junius translated his Latin book into the vernacular himself, consciously developing a Dutch *schilderspraecke* (vocabulary to speak about painting).[45] It has recently been demonstrated that Junius's digressions, especially in the much longer Dutch version, were grounded in conversations about painting in collectors' and artists' circles.[46] Junius was secretary to one of the greatest collectors of the time, Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel, and personally knew artists such as Rubens and Anthony van Dyck. In 1635 he wrote to his brother-in-law Gerardus Vossius that 'artists and all who love those delightful arts are pressing him' to translate his book into the vernacular.[47] One of these artists would have been the engraver Robert van Voerst, who was involved in the publication of the book; he was a close friend of Junius and also worked in Arundel's service.[48] He was also the step-uncle of Ter Borch, who was staying in Van Voerst's London studio at precisely that time (1635–6). As a young and impressionable artist, Ter Borch would have absorbed every word of the conversations between learned connoisseurs and practising artists in Arundel's circle.

FIG. 19 Samuel van Hoogstraten, *The Doctor's Visit*, c. 1665, oil on canvas, 69.5 × 55 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, on loan from the City of Amsterdam (A. van der Hoop Bequest).

Junius's passages on imitation and emulation connected well-known classical sources to practices familiar to famous Netherlandish and Italian masters and connoisseurs. Such sections would have become exemplary for a generation that had started its career at that time – as is also clear from the numerous times Van Hoogstraten quoted from or referred to Junius's text.[49] Despite his emphasis on rivalry, Van Hoogstraten never fully articulated the relation between imitation and rivalry and he seems quite ambivalent about allowing recognisable borrowings.[50] By 1678 he had perhaps too often seen painters taking bits and pieces and 'combining them unartfully and infelicitously', as Junius described the results when artists failed to digest their borrowings thoroughly.[51] Junius, however, not being a painter but well acquainted with discussions among connoisseurs, did connect imitation and competition explicitly, thus providing insight into the preoccupations of art lovers. He defined *aemulatie* (the Dutchified version of the Latin *aemulatio*) as 'rivalry or the ambition to imitate'. He considers this a necessary drive caused by 'a restless desire for honour' to surpass the best works of one's master, the masters of one's master and every other artist.[52] When discussing imitation, Junius also warned that one should disguise borrowings and that one's paintings should not bear too much similarity to those of another renowned master. Having said this, however, Junius stated that if a work does resemble another, the likeness should be intentional: 'Every artist is free to honour another artist because of elements he admires, for in my opinion, the artists who beat all others are those who diligently pursue the old art with a new argument, thus adroitly bestowing their paintings with the pleasurable enjoyment of dissimilar similarity [*het aengenaeme vermaeck van eene ongelijcke gelijckheyt*].'[53] He added that this is especially true when one is driven by 'praiseworthy competition', and he emphasised that one should limit oneself to those elements that fit one's own nature.

fig. 20 Nicolaes Jansz Clock after Hendrick Goltzius, *The Sense of Sight (Visus)*, 1596, engraving, 238 × 172 mm, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam.

This passage not only conveys that connoisseurs find it enjoyable to compare similar works by excellent masters, but also that the best masters possess a privilege reserved only for them: measuring themselves against other renowned artists by displaying a 'dissimilar similarity', bringing to the existing art 'new arguments' that suit their specific talent. Nevertheless, this suggests the risk that art lovers might be critical, judging the artist to have failed in finding the right balance between similarity and dissimilarity – which is, of course, a narrow and subjective line. When the artist's adroitness is not considered sufficient and his 'new argument' is not convincing, he is merely joining borrowed bits and pieces, like Aesop's crow.

These notions are enlightening when examining paintings included in the exhibition. These works testify that the artists often aspired to achieve an emulative 'dissimilar similarity'. They demonstrate their distinct approach to similar motifs in many aspects of their painting. Their 'arguments' could reside in the beauty and grace of the figures; the lifelike quality of poses and movements; the liveliness of expression; the ingenuity of the narrative (including the wit of the response to other artists); the arrangement of the figures; the suggestion of space through light and shade, colour and perspective. Finally, the manner of painting – not just the handling of the brush, but the diverse ways through which illusion is created through paint on a flat surface – was crucial to the 'argument'.[54] It was up to the connoisseur to compare all this with what he had seen, remembering in his mind's eye other paintings or studying others first-hand in the collection he was visiting.

Magnificent examples of 'dissimilar similarity' are Frans van Mieris's *Duet* (cat. 3.2), Ter Borch's *Young Woman at her Toilet with a Maid* (cat. 6.1) and *Woman at a Mirror* (cat. 7.1), Vermeer's *Young Woman Standing at a Virginal* (fig. 26) and *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal* (cat. 4.2) as well as Dou's *Woman at the Clavichord* (cat. 4.1). The theme of women at a keyboard instrument exemplifies how such repeated subjects came into being and spread rapidly. I will discuss a sequence of such paintings in the catalogue entry *Musical Duos* (p. 128); I restrict myself here to the paintings mentioned above.

Ter Borch painted *Young Woman at her Toilet with a Maid* (cat. 6.1) around or shortly after 1650. It is, as far as we know, the first painting in which he made a great show of depicting a brilliantly rendered satin skirt worn by a young woman standing in a highly stylised pose and surrounded by luxurious furniture.[55] With this painting Ter Borch created a type that became a resounding success, as appears not only from the number of related paintings he himself made in subsequent years, but chiefly from the extraordinary response this work sparked among other artists. This composition employs an upright format with relatively large figures in wealthy interiors, the figures are placed in bright light against a darkish background, with a focus on a woman's shimmering satin skirt and an emphasis on graceful deportment. Ter Borch's toilet scenes might be considered a demonstration of Angel's advice concerning the use of borrowed motifs that should go unnoticed. It would not have been Ter Borch's aim for the viewer to recognise specific references. Rather, he knew how to 'merge borrowed material in such a sweetly flowing manner into his own invention, that it cannot be perceived', though the connoisseur would have grasped the resonances of a larger tradition.[56]

It is most striking that Ter Borch emphatically reinstalled grace as a central feature. For more than a generation, most Dutch artists had consciously jettisoned grace (*grazia*, *gratie*, *bevallicheijt*), which had been a central tenet in Renaissance thinking about art, in favour of an uncompromising naturalness.[57] However, by this time, the tide had begun to change. For Ter Borch, inventions by Hendrick Goltzius appear to have been the canonical model; as a young student his father undoubtedly had supplied him with prints after Goltzius's inventions to train him in drawing.[58] When inventing *Young Woman at her Toilet with a Maid*, Ter Borch must have had engravings after Goltzius's allegorical female figures of *Sight* and *Pride* in mind (figs 20, 21). The remarkable pose – pelvis pushed forward, back pronouncedly arched, and neck inclined forward – can be seen in many mannerist prints by and after Goltzius.[59] The figure of *Pride*, engraved by Jacob Matham, is even dressed in heavy satin falling in similar folds. In fact, before Ter Borch, only Goltzius rendered the effect of the stiffness of heavy silk seen in Ter Borch's skirts – made of material which 'stands' on the floor and falls in large angular planes. One of the artist's largest and most famous prints, *The Judgement of Midas* (1590) (fig. 22) might also have been in the back of Ter Borch's mind. Opulent satin costumes and similar poses (even the maidservant) are found there as well.[60] I do not wish to suggest that Ter Borch consciously borrowed all such motifs from these prints, only that he recalled such inventions when conceiving *Young Woman at her Toilet with a Maid*.

fig. 21 Jacob Matham after Hendrick Goltzius, *Pride (Superbia)*, c. 1585–9, engraving, 216 × 144 mm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Thus, with great ingenuity, Ter Borch drew on familiar pictorial and iconographic traditions.[61] Canonical paintings such as Bernardo Strozzi's *Vanitas (The Old Courtesan)* (fig. 23) and Rubens's *Venus before a Mirror* (fig. 24) were also part of Ter Borch's mental archive, as confirmed by *Woman at a Mirror* (cat. 7.1

), also dating to the early 1650s. When conceiving this composition Ter Borch employed the other method, self-consciously and recognisably referring to admired inventions of great masters, brilliantly turning them into something entirely different and creating a 'dissimilar similarity'. Such a radical 'new argument' would be admired and discussed for its naturalism and wit. He transformed Strozzi's *Vanitas*, which depicts an ugly old woman looking into a mirror while holding Venus' roses, into a fashionably and gorgeously dressed

fig. 22 Hendrick Goltzius, *The Judgement of Midas*, 1590, engraving, 423 × 672 mm, The British Museum, London.

FIG. 23 Bernardo Strozzi, *Vanitas (The Old Courtesan)*, c. 1637, oil on canvas, 135 × 109 cm, The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.

young woman. Strozzi's painting must have been well known to Amsterdam connoisseurs, as it was owned by the Reynst brothers and had probably been in Amsterdam since 1647.[62] By turning her back more towards the viewer and changing Strozzi's young woman holding the mirror into a young boy, Ter Borch also wittily demonstrated his knowledge of Rubens's great painting in which Cupid holds a mirror for the voluptuous nude Venus.[63]

Ter Borch's two paintings would prompt many other depictions of beautiful women before a mirror by younger artists (see pp. 145, 152). Ter Borch's *Young Woman at her Toilet with a Maid*, however, would also be the starting point for paintings with other subjects. A prime example is Van Mieris's *Duet* (CAT. 3.2) dated 1658, which, in turn, stimulated vigorous responses from other painters (see p. 128).[64] It is precisely Ter Borch's depiction of a richly dressed young lady's gracefulness that Van Mieris appropriated. The Leiden painter

FIG. 24 Peter Paul Rubens, *Venus before a Mirror*, c. 1614–15, oil on panel, 123 × 98 cm, Hohenbuchau Collection, on permanent loan to Liechtenstein. The Princely Collections, Vienna

FIG. 25 Jan Saenredam after Hendrick Goltzius, *The Sense of Hearing*, c. 1595, engraving, 173 × 123 mm, The British Museum, London.

certainly recognised the reference to Goltzius and altered the proportions of his young lady to further approach those of Goltzius's mannerist type of women through lengthening the figure, making her neck longer and her head relatively smaller.[65]

It would have been evident to connoisseurs that Van Mieris was vying with both Ter Borch and his own master, Dou. Van Mieris strove to surpass the exceptionally detailed refinement of Dou by making his brushstrokes entirely invisible. This resulted in a manner that lacked the liveliness of Dou's painting technique, but he compensated for this through a lively play of light caressing all the surfaces.[66] With this breathtaking technique he struck up the competition with Ter Borch and referred overtly to the latter's painting discussed above and to a more recent work, *Two Women Making Music, with a Page* (CAT. 3.1) of about 1657. Van Mieris used the arrangement of the figures in the latter painting – the page coming in with a tray and the lute-playing woman transformed into a young man – but inserted the standing woman of Ter Borch's earlier painting, not only exaggerating the Ter Borchian elegance, but also displaying an even more miraculous effect of shimmering satin. He also retained the velvet-covered chair in the foreground.[67] Van Mieris emphasised the sinuousness of the woman's figure by placing her against a light, geometric background dominated by straight verticals, an innovation that was entirely different from Ter Borch's manner of setting off a brightly illuminated figure against a dark background.[68]

When choosing the subject – a woman before a keyboard instrument[69] – Van Mieris also turned to a tradition that was well known from earlier prints (FIG. 25).[70] This aspect of the painting, however, was not meant to demonstrate recognisable connections to specific sources, though the wit with which he raised the motif to a new theme entirely suitable for a Ter Borchian type of picture obviously strongly appealed to connoisseurs and colleagues, given the number of paintings with this subject that would follow. These included Dou's *Woman at the Clavichord* (CAT. 4.1) of about 1665.[71]

It was only around this time, rather late in his career, that Dou began depicting 'Ter Borchian' young ladies dressed in satin seated in wealthy interiors. Dou integrated this figure type into his signature format. He aligned the figure and the main objects on the margin of a strong beam of light coming from a large window on the left, which flows diagonally through the space towards the foreground and leaves a large part of the interior in the dark. The viewer's entrance to this space is defined by a stone arch. As in several of Dou's paintings of the late 1650s and 1660s, the stone window frame has been opened up so that the admiring viewer, the lover who is invited to play a virtual duet with this young beauty, can enter the wondrous world of the fine painter – a world revealed by the drawn tapestry. She addresses the viewer, thus making the invitation to join her direct. We know that this work hung among twenty-seven paintings by Dou that were owned by burgomaster Johan de Bye in Leiden. An advertisement in the *Haarlemsche Courant* and Balthasar de Monconys's diary both record that they were on view in a house in Leiden's Breestraat.[72]

Vermeer contended in his turn with both Van Mieris and Dou when he took up the subject of the woman at a keyboard instrument late in his career. In *Young Woman Standing at a Virginal* (FIG. 26) he responded to Van Mieris's *Duet*, while *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal* (CAT. 4.2) refers directly to Dou's *Woman at the Clavichord*. The standing musician's natural pose and proportions seem to comment on Van Mieris's over-stylised elegance. The strict geometry of a light-filled background, an innovative feature in Van Mieris's painting,

FIG. 27 Werner van den Valckert, *Venus and Cupid*, c. 1612–14, oil on panel, 101.4 × 75.6 cm, private collection.

FIG. 26 Johannes Vermeer, *Young Woman Standing at a Virginal*, c. 1671–4, oil on canvas, 51.7 × 45.2 cm, The National Gallery, London.

is here pushed to its limits. In contrast to many of his aloof women, Vermeer enhanced the directness of the confrontation between the young woman and the viewer, which is also seen in Dou's *Woman at the Clavichord*. To underline this, Vermeer ingeniously inserted into the painting of the standing woman the old motif of Venus and Cupid, who both address and entice the beholder (FIG. 27). He updated the theme by transforming this familiar pair into an earthly Venus and a painting of Cupid hanging behind her.

The art lover is, however, not only tempted to fall in love with these two women, but is especially challenged to compare the hugely different techniques with which Vermeer, Van Mieris and Dou rendered illusion. The spectacular sheen of the satin of the skirts and sleeves and the soft lustre of the chair's blue velvet in *Young Woman Standing at a Virginal* beg comparison with Van Mieris's technique. In *Young Woman Seated at a Virginal* the glossy satin of the dress, the polish of the viola's wood and the heavy woolliness of the colourful tapestry invite measurement against Dou's manner of painting. More radically than before, Vermeer displays the contrast of his manner with the descriptive finesse of the two Leiden painters. Vermeer's rejection of detail in favour of the optical appearance of reflected light, conveyed through flat areas of different gradations of light and shade placed next to each other, could not differ more strongly from the uncanny modulations of colour and tone expressed through imperceptible brushstrokes in Van Mieris's imitation of silk.[73]

In Vermeer and Dou's paintings of women seated at a keyboard instrument, the blue satin of the women's costume falls into small pleats and seems to be of a somewhat thinner silk than in the other paintings. Dou manages to suggest the warp and weft of the material through an extremely fine technique of painting with tiny short lines applied with remarkable dexterity. Vermeer responded to this by depicting all surfaces slightly out of focus and making the flatness and angularity of his planes of colour even more conspicuous. Equally eye-catching is the great difference in the rendering of the heavy tapestry with its design of leaves, fruits and geometric ornaments. A connoisseur such as Monconys would have marvelled at how each strove for a convincing illusion: Dou's virtuoso description of every detail of the texture of the rendered materials and Vermeer's brilliancy in suggesting the optical effect of it.

These are only a few examples to demonstrate how artists were acutely aware of their colleagues' activities and responded self-consciously to each other's work in order to show connoisseurs their ingenuity in employing these motifs. Each of them displayed his individual characteristics in figure types, arrangements, ways of suggesting space, and manner of painting, creating a dissimilar similarity and inviting comparison. Simultaneously, each of these artists saw to it that his works were immediately recognisable as a Ter Borch, a Dou, a Van Mieris, a Steen, a Metsu or a Vermeer. Discriminating connoisseurs formed the critical foundation that made the astonishingly high quality of this entire performance possible. By pointing out similarities and differences between the works, they demonstrated that they belonged to the select group of *Konst-vroede Liefhebbers* ('experienced art lovers').[74] Not only could they appreciate this rivalry and value such quality, but they were also eager to pay for it.