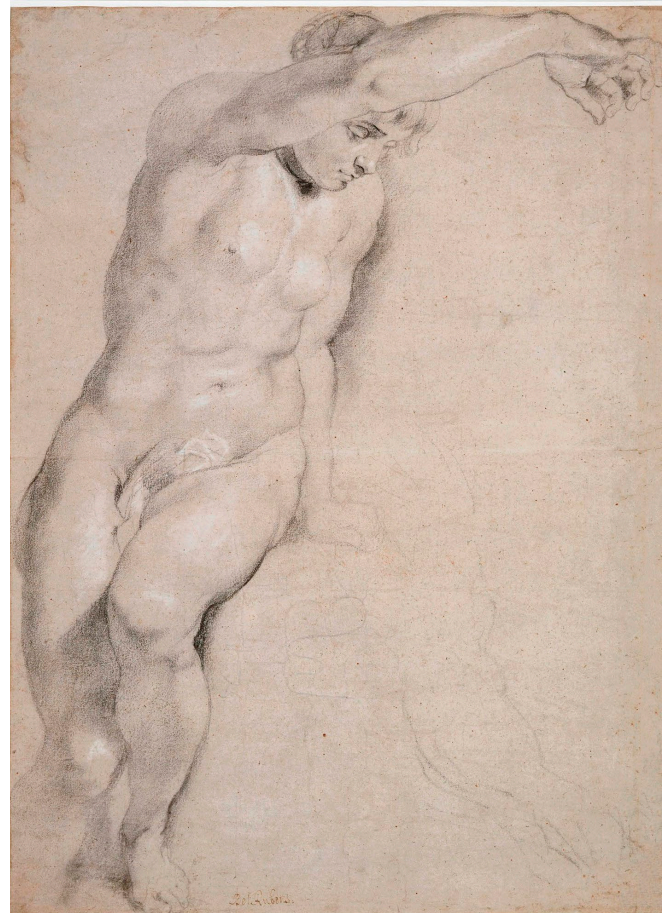


Humanising Art:

Women in 17th-century Dutch and Flemish Drawings

There is every indication to suggest that seventeenth-century Dutch women enjoyed more social freedom than women elsewhere in Europe. Laws stipulated specific sanctions for husbands who abused their wives, widows could take over their late husband's estate, while unmarried daughters could meet young men in the middle of the night and walk in the streets without any supervision. In addition, there were several female artists who made their mark during that period. Judith Leyster (1609-1660) for instance, an eminent painter in Haarlem, was granted admission to the local Guild of Saint Luke, the guild for painters and artists in the Low Countries. But how is this freedom evidenced in artworks of the period?

Netherlandish art of the sixteenth and seventeenth century was significantly influenced by the Italian Renaissance, a period 'full of firsts'.¹ Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) left Antwerp in 1600 and stayed in Italy for almost eight years. The techniques and methods he encountered there helped shape his style as is evidenced in the preparatory life study drawing for *Psyche* (1612-15) [Fig.1], featured in the exhibition. In the drawing, the figure's right foot is unfinished because the artist's primary concern was with the model's pose, which is possibly copied from a Michelangelo figure in the Sistine Chapel.² Moreover, the muscular right hand and left foot and upper body of the figure indicate that *Psyche*'s torso was sketched after a male model, a strategy well established by Italian artists, such as Raphael [Fig.2]



[Fig. 1] Peter Paul Rubens, *Psyche*, 1612-15, black and white chalks on buff paper, 581 x 412 mm. Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2021.

The practice of drawing nudes from life in the Netherlands has existed since the sixteenth century, however, the social status of the female models as well as the relationship they had with the artists presents particular interest and even today it draws the attention of critics, art historians or simple art-lovers. Despite their legal rights, women always had to appear modest and public nudity



[Fig. 2] Raphael, *The Three Graces*, 1517-18, red chalk over some stylus underdrawing, 203 x 258 mm. Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2021.

was considered an immoral and offensive act. Even the display of cleavage in a low-cut dress, for instance, was commonly acknowledged to be an indication that the woman was a prostitute. Artists often used their wives as models, but there is little evidence that wives would have posed images of nudes intended for sale. Rubens's painting of his wife *Helena Fourment ('The Fur Wrap')* (1636-38, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna), for example, was intended for private consumption only. Rather, contemporary written confessions, or witness statements during legal inquiries, show that artists, either alone or in groups, used prostitutes as nude models. However, artists rarely faced the legal and social consequences suffered by these women.

As seen in Rubens's *Psyche*, classical mythology was one of the major sources of subject matter for Dutch and Flemish artists, following the Italian Renaissance tradition. Netherlandish art however, developed further themes based on a desire to record all aspects of the material world, what was later categorized as 'genre' art. A significant part of this 'descriptive art' was that of domestic realism.³ Realistic portrayals of domestic environments had

first emerged in Italian Renaissance art but mainly as a background of religious scenes. In both the Dutch Republic and the Spanish Netherlands, however, as the seventeenth century evolved, scenes and figures from domestic everyday life came into focus and became popular. Women were not entirely detached from their mythological or religious roles, nor were they shown only as objects of men's desire, but more space was given to their depiction in their actual roles in society. Similarly, there was an expansion in the range of female portraits, which could be taken at all stages of life, from childhood to old age.

Although children, young people, and adults in their prime feature in many Netherlandish portraits and genre paintings, depictions of the elderly are also surprisingly numerous. Following long-standing traditions, society viewed older people either as symbols of life's transience or as paradigms of wisdom and virtue.⁴ That is why, apart from genre scenes where they are occupied with chores, they are often shown reading books, holding the Bible, or praying. Elderly women, in particular, are found as the subjects

of dramatically expressive portraits, as seen, for instance, in Cornelis Visscher's *Portrait of an Old Woman in a Bonnet* (1652) [Fig. 3]. The artist has no desire to beautify his anonymous model; on the contrary, he depicts the wrinkles around her eyes and cheeks in detail and describes the white hair around her left temple. The use of pencil on vellum, a high-quality thin processed calfskin, allows Visscher to picture the gradations of the worn-out dress which indicates the lower-class background of the woman, while her downcast pose suggests modesty. The date and the artist's signature on the top right demonstrates that the drawing was finished. The use of such an expensive material as vellum indicates that even an elderly and anonymous woman of apparently modest background might be considered an appropriate subject for the upper end of the art market.



[Fig. 3] Cornelis Visscher, *Portrait of an Old Woman in a Bonnet*, 1652, pencil on vellum, 152 x 134 mm. Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2021.

This broadening of subject matter in Netherlandish art to include more everyday female figures encouraged comparable evolution and change across Europe. Paintings or drawings of prostitutes were encompassed equally with their moral opposites, virtuous old women, within the wider artistic subject matter of the period. Of course, religious decorum and social stereotypes would prevail, but a more fully rounded human version of Western Art had emerged.

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¹ Peter Burke, 'The Arts in Renaissance Italy', in *The Italian Renaissance: culture and society in Italy*, Cambridge, 2014, p.19.

² For Italian Renaissance artists, copying was central since their apprenticeship years. Although today we tend to disdain copies, for them this practice was a basic method of art education. Apart from training however, copies could be reproduced on commission for pure commercial gain. Rubens kept copying throughout his life for both reasons and while his painted copies are numerous, the drawing copies also constitute a significant part of his oeuvre.

³ Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing. Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, Chicago, 1984.

⁴ Wayne E. Franits, *Paragons of Virtue. Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-century Dutch Art*, Cambridge, Mass., 1993, p. 166.

Further Reading:

Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing. Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, Chicago, 1984

Peter Burke, *The Italian Renaissance: Culture and Society in Italy*, Cambridge, 2014 (revised third edition, first in 1986)

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Simon Schama, 'Wives and Wantons: Versions of Womanhood in 17th Century Dutch Art', *Oxford Art Journal*, 3/1, April 1980, pp. 5-13

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