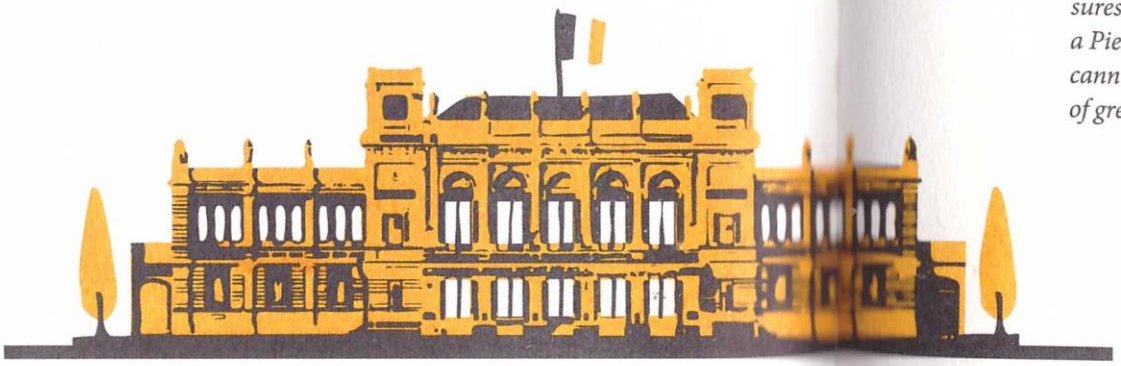
1648

FRENCH ROYAL ACADEMY OF PAINTING AND SCULPTURE FOUNDED



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ACADEMIES AND ALTERNATIVES

From the *Conférences de L'Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture pendant l'année 1667* (translated in 1740) by André Felibien, prolific writer on art and artists:

Preface

Towards the End of the Year 1663, the King, by giving to Mr. Colbert the Office of the Superintendent of the Buildings, shewed he intended to make the Arts flourish more than they had done thereto. This Great Man [Colbert] … said there were two ways of teaching Arts and Sciences, by Precepts and by Examples: the one Instructed the Understanding, and the other the Imagination: And as in painting, the Imagination has the greatest Share of the Work, it is manifest that Examples are very necessary to make one perfect in that Art, and are the surest Guides to young Students … Although the Perfection of a Piece chiefly depends on the Force and Beauty of Genius, one cannot deny that any Analyses that might be made, would be of great Use.

(*From the Conference of 5 November 1667 by Charles Le Brun on Nicolas Poussin's* The Israelites Gathering Manna in the Desert)*:*

Mr Le Brun … *said he would divide his Discourse into four parts. In the first he would speak of Disposition in general, and of every Figure in particular. Secondly of Design, and the Proportions of Figures. Thirdly of the Expression of the Passions. And lastly material and aerial Perspective and the Harmony of the Colours …*

The Painter having to represent the Jews *in a Country unprovided of every thing and in extreme Necessity, this Work must carry some Marks to express his Thoughts, and which may agree with his Subject. For this Reason, the Figures are in a languishing Condition, to express the Weariness and Hunger with which they were distressed. Even the Light of the Air appears pale and weak, which imprints a kind of Sadness on the Figures.*

The formation of academies of art, dedicated to the promotion of their members as socially prestigious, intellectually informed and imaginatively inspired, marked a change. Painters and sculptors had previously been members of guilds and were expected to serve long apprenticeships. Artists were employed on a contractual basis for each work, under strict conditions of size, materials, delivery and subject matter. During the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries a series of elite 'super-artists' strove to claim a higher status alongside men of learning and literature. They could point to the disciplines needed for the imitation of nature, above all perspective and anatomy, and to the requirement that artists should be rich

in invention and rhetoric. Early academies of art aspired to provide education in the intellectual aspects of high art. This was the case with the first such foundation in 1563, the Accademia del Disegno in Florence under the aegis of Grand duke Cosimo de' Medici, acting at the suggestion of Vasari. The Accademia di San Luca followed in Rome in 1577.

The most powerful academy, the French Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, was founded in 1648. The institutional machinery of the French Academy was shaped into one of the tools used by the King's Finance Minister, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, to regulate economic and intellectual life. Under Colbert's regime, Charles le Brun, rhetorical painter of large narrative canvases, rose to a position of unrivalled power, ensuring that art promoted the official values of French culture.

Poussin, *The Israelites Gathering Manna in the Desert*, 1637–9

One of the activities of the French Academy was to promote a series of 'Conferences', each dedicated to a canonical work of approved art, and led by one of the academicians. They were published by Felibien. The first contemporary painting singled out by Le Brun, Nicolas Poussin's *The Israelites Gathering Manna in the Desert*, may serve to define the norms to which all academies aspired.

Poussin moved to Rome in 1624 and his return to Paris in 1640 was not to be permanent. The painting's commissioner was Paul Fréart de Chantelou, one of a new breed of aristocratic connoisseurs. Given the painting's complex

CHARLES LE BRUN
PRESIDENT OF FRENCH ACADEMY AND PAINTER

account of the starving Israelites' reactions to the fall of bread from heaven, Poussin wrote to encourage his patron to 'study the story and the picture to see whether each thing is appropriate'. In other words, the spectator should carefully examine how the artist produces a series of emotional set pieces to capture the essence of the Old Testament story.

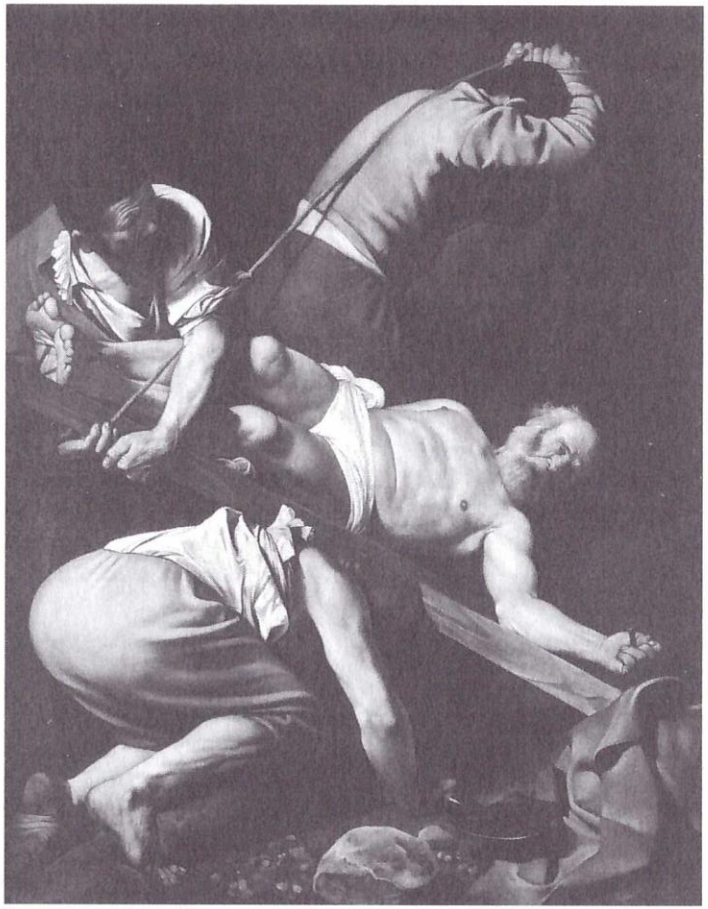
Le Brun follows Poussin's procedure in his account of the composition. He quickly begins to read the poignant episodes: 'there is a woman giving the Breast to another old Woman, who seems to fondle a young child … There is an old man, whose Back is naked … A young Man is holding him by the Arm, and helping him to raise up … A Woman turning her Back, and holding a Child in her Arms … is beckoning to a young Man, who has a Basket full of Manna in his Hand, to carry some of it to the old Man'. Le Brun explains how each group is a tableau within the tableau. He is eager to point out (not always convincingly) how Poussin's poses depend on a deep study of works from ancient Rome. He explains how to read the expression of each of the actors' inner emotions. Everyone behaves with decorum; each person acts perfectly in keeping with his or her gender, age and social position. The praying Moses and pointing Aaron gravely emphasise the heavenly origins of the miracle, while two boys scramble competitively on the ground for manna. Every aspect of the setting – landscape, sky, light and colour – contributes to the whole. Le Brun also explains that Poussin is not showing a single moment but is telling the story as a great dramatist would. This is poetry, rhetoric, history, theatre, opera, and visual music where everything is deliberated to an extreme degree.

Alongside the art produced in the academies – some great, some worthy, much dull – arose a series of vigorous alternatives from artists who aspired to portray nature in a manner more direct and less rhetorical and idealised than that of academic artists. But, as always, nature and its imitation meant different things to different artists in different contexts.

The most powerful alternative in large-scale figure painting was the style of Caravaggio. Arriving in Rome, then dominated by the Roman Academy, the assertive young Lombard with a gift for vivid still-life painting, showed a marked inclination to ignore traditional disciplines like perspective. He was taken up by a group of adventurous patrons and young artists. Dealing with the turbulent Caravaggio was rarely without problems, and he has come to serve as an exemplar of wilful rebellion and creative fervour.

His *Crucifixion of St Peter* in the Cerasi Chapel in Santa Maria del Popolo demonstrates the extreme directness and relentless focus of his narrative style. The compact chapel had been acquired in 1600 by Tiberio Cerasi, the papal treasurer, and he commissioned Caravaggio and Annibale Carracci to provide the painted decorations. Carracci, from the Bolognese family of artists, was to paint the *Assumption of the Virgin* for the altar in a colourful early Baroque style, animated by elaborate motions and gestures. Caravaggio was to supply lateral narratives of the two highest-ranking saints, Peter and Paul. On the right wall of the chapel, we now see Paul collapsing backwards into our space with a diagonal thump, blinded by the light of revelation. On the

left, the cross of St Peter, to which he is already nailed, is laboriously levered into its inverted position. In a claustrophobic and starkly illuminated space, harsh realities assert themselves in a highly selective manner: sinewy and wrinkled skin, coarse garments, creased brows, grained



Caravaggio, *Crucifixion of St Peter*, 1600–1601

wood, iron nails and the taut rope biting into the jerkin of the uppermost labourer. The exaggerated physicality is designed to emphasise the saint's sacrifice.

The intensity of expression is very much in keeping with the reassertion of Christian intensity in Roman Catholic religious art, a vigorous response to the iconoclastic tendencies of Northern Europe's Reformation. The most assertive realisation of Papal Rome is the sculpture and architecture of Gian Lorenzo Bernini. The spiritual dynamism of Bernini's forms in space is exemplified by his *Ecstasy of St Theresa*, finished in 1652 for the Cornaro Chapel in Santa Maria della Vittoria. The sculptural centrepiece of the chapel is illuminated by a concealed light that gleams on the gilded rays; the ecstatic virgin saint, collapsed in a cascade of folds, is stabbed repeatedly by a joyous angel. As Theresa herself recalled, the angel wielded 'a long spear of gold':

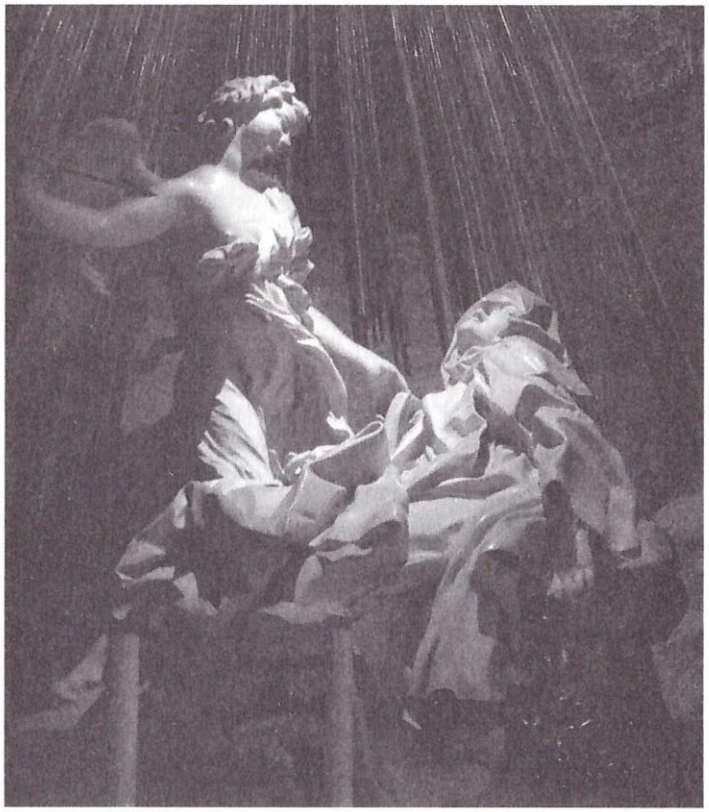
> The angel appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also, and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it.

Bernini has captured the deepest moment of the saint's spiritual intercourse. God transforms the supreme discomfort of her flesh into the divine delight of her soul.

On either side of the chapel, sculpted men from the Cornaro family are visible behind balconies at the end of

vaulted arcades. It is sometimes said that they are literally watching, like spectators in a theatre. They are not. They are considering the mysteries of the event, and of the ritual of the regular masses performed by the priest in our earthly realm. Theresa's is an inner vision, and so is theirs.

Bernini's art is the epitome of what we mean by 'Baroque': dominated by complex and contrasting motions, spatial fluidity, dynamic asymmetries, and powerful light



Bernini, *Ecstasy of St Theresa*, c.1647–52

and colour. However, in case we should be tempted to polarise the 'classical' Poussin and the 'Baroque' Bernini, it is worth noting that Poussin's champion, Paul Fréart de Chantelou, was a great admirer and companion of the sculptor. Bernini was no less passionate about antiquity than Poussin, though they brought different eyes to it. As we saw with the *Laocoön*, antiquity could look quite Baroque on its own account. The vigour and grandeur of Baroque art gives powerful expression to the grandiloquence of Church and state often acting in conjunction. It is an art of strong rhetoric and big gestures of power.

Peter Paul Rubens from Flanders is the painter we usually think of in this Baroque context. Greatly favoured by the crowned heads of Europe, he was the natural successor to Titian – and like his Venetian predecessor was knighted by a Holy Roman Emperor (Philip IV of Spain). Like Jan van Eyck, he served as an ambassador, active in some of the most important European disputes. From his base in Antwerp, he created major works for France, Italy, Spain and England (where he was also knighted by James I). Classically educated and aristocratic in manner, he was the grandest of grand painters, specialising in Catholic and secular histories on large scales.

His *Horrors of War* plunges us into the turbulent events of his international career. Commissioned in the late 1630s by Duke Ferdinando de' Medici of Florence, it alludes to the Thirty Years' War. The flaming composition surges in compressed disarray to the right, as if it were the liquidised frieze of an ancient sarcophagus. The god of war, Mars, with his blood-red cloak, is dragged onwards by the Fury

Alekto, accompanied by pestilence and famine. Venus – her pink flesh pressing on the gleaming steel of Mars's armour – ineffectually implores her lover to relent. On the left a distraught woman cries to the heavens, outside the doors of the Temple of Janus, rent open by war. Civilised values are literally trampled underfoot: Mars treads on a book and a drawing; harmony tumbles to the ground with a broken lute; a terrified woman with a baby and an architect have fallen under the onslaught. Brilliant opaque highlights, sensuously translucent glazes and flaming brushwork serve to animate every inch of the violent canvas, demonstrating Rubens's colouristic virtuosity in a self-conscious manner.

Rubens was exceptionally productive, both on his own account and via his large workshop. The greatest independent master to emerge from his workshop was Anthony van Dyck, who, moving to London in 1632, took up Rubens's links with the English Court where he was knighted and appointed 'principalle Paynter in ordinary to their Majesties',

Rubens, *The Consequence of War*, 1637–8

Van Dyck, *King Charles I at the Hunt*, 1638

King Charles I and Queen Henrietta Maria. The king was as much a failure as a monarch as he was a success as the greatest collector of art in Britain from any period. Given the continued restrictions of subject matter for art in the wake of the Reformation, van Dyck's major activity was as a portraitist, but he transformed the genre in such a way that each of his major canvases became a kind of 'theatre' in its own right.

Van Dyck's *Charles at the Hunt* is highly inventive, at once regal and informal. The diminutive king stands with posed nonchalance, his silken elbow thrust towards us. His cane and sword speak of aristocratic command. The low horizon ensures that he looks down on us, however benignly. The deferential horse and the two grooms are literally cast in the shade. Equestrian portraits had become fashionable for rulers in both sculpture and painting, as had standing full-lengths. Van Dyck artfully combines the two in a composition that looks natural, even spontaneous, in its depiction of man at ease with the countryside he rules. However, it's unlikely that the king is wearing actual hunting gear, and such a wide-brimmed hat would not be suitable for fast galloping. The painting technique loses nothing in comparison to that of Rubens. The brushwork is attentive

yet fluid, while the translucent glazes and opaque passages of thick paint (impasto), with colouristically open shadows, conjure up effects of light and texture without apparent effort. The artistic poise of the painter and the magisterial poise of the monarch work together.

The painter has become a gentleman. When Sir Anthony died in 1641, to 'the universal grief of lovers of painting', his tomb declared that 'for all the riches he had acquired, Anthony van Dyck left little property, having spent everything on living magnificently, more like a prince than a painter'.

A comparable setting of courtly magnificence, albeit a characteristically Spanish one, is evident in Diego Velásquez's famed *Las Meninas*. Velásquez had risen to a point of high esteem in the Spanish court of Philip IV and had been granted the use of the large room in the Alcázar Palace that we see in the picture (overleaf). He was effectively the director of court art and curator of the royal collection, which included masterpieces by Titian and Rubens. Velásquez shows himself, brush and palette in hand, working on a huge canvas, somehow exercising a magnetic attraction in spite of his subsidiary position. His 'studio' is visited by the only child of the king and queen, the Infanta Margarita Teresa, with her entourage, including two maids of honour (the *meninas*) a dwarf and a leonine dog. They are looking out of the canvas at us, or, by implication, at Philip and Mariana who are (again by implication) either arriving or about to leave, perhaps through the doorway at the far end of the room, where the vanishing point of the perspective is located. They will not have been standing long

for the grand double portrait that is reflected luminously in the mirror. Rulers did not 'sit' for long hours as later artists required.

The set-up seems at first to be straightforward, but the painter has not mapped out the space in an explicitly geometrical manner. There are enough missing and inconsistent clues to prevent certainty. We are invited to explore visual and psychological possibilities – a temptation that legions of art historians have not resisted. We are teased into alternative readings of the interacting permutations of the artist, the unseen king and queen, the unseen face of the canvas, the infanta's entourage, the man in the door and ourselves. Velásquez, the infanta and the dwarf compete to meet our eyes with assured glances. The light and shade play elusive roles in the visual games. Just-identifiable canvases by Rubens and others hang darkly on the walls, outshone by the mirror, which seems to reflect the painter's own canvas. The brightest patch of light paint, on the distant wall through the door, paradoxically moves backwards not forwards. The paint itself promises definition but offers only seductive suggestion. Impulsive slashes and wriggles of impasto melt into the sheen of finely tailored silk or the rough coat of the dog. The magic is equal to but distinct from that of Titian and Rubens.

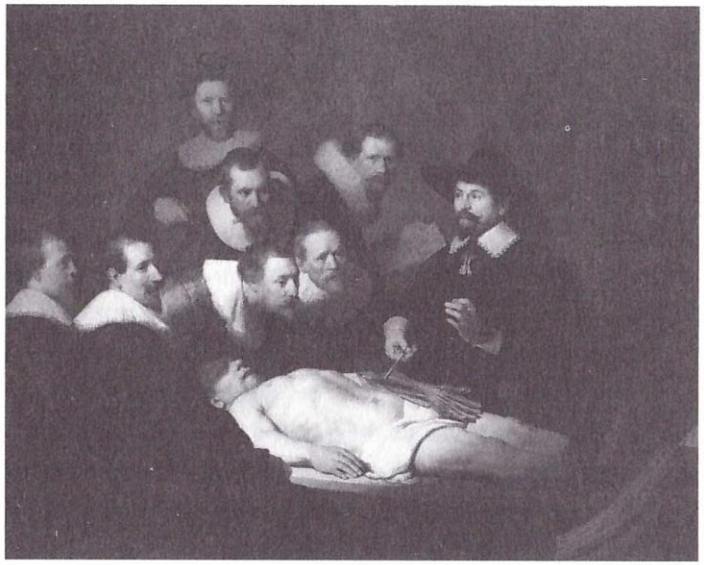
Three years after the painting was completed, and a year before his death, Velásquez was admitted to the ancient Order of Santiago. The red cross of the order was imposed on his chest. The existence of the legend that the king himself painted the cross tells us a great deal about the perceived status of the greatest artists in the mid-seventeenth century.

Velásquez, *Las Meninas* (*The Maids of Honour*), 1656

In 1648, Philip IV eventually recognised the independence of the Seven United Provinces of the Protestant Netherlands. As in Britain, portraiture reigned supreme, though other genres flourished: landscape, townscape, interiors, still-life and animal painting. The prospering Dutch were the first to leave a substantial and varied record of their bourgeois mercantile society and the agricultural ambience of farmers and peasants. In the middle of the century Paulus Potter was to paint the portrait

of a bull in a canvas over 11 feet wide! This is not to say that classicising painting was absent, and Rembrandt certainly harboured aspirations to rival Rubens in Catholic Antwerp. He did so in a direct style that was less susceptible to grand idealisation. He was no less adept than Rubens and van Dyck at cajoling freely applied paint to perform suggestive miracles of description, but without the conscious grace his rivals acquired from Venetian art.

Like van Dyck, Rembrandt van Rijn transformed portrait painting into a genre that could convey deep significance and what Leonardo called 'the motions of the mind'. He was the first artist to explore the outer and inner processes of his own life through a sustained series of painted self-portraits. The picture we are looking at here, from the peak



Rembrandt, *Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp*, 1632

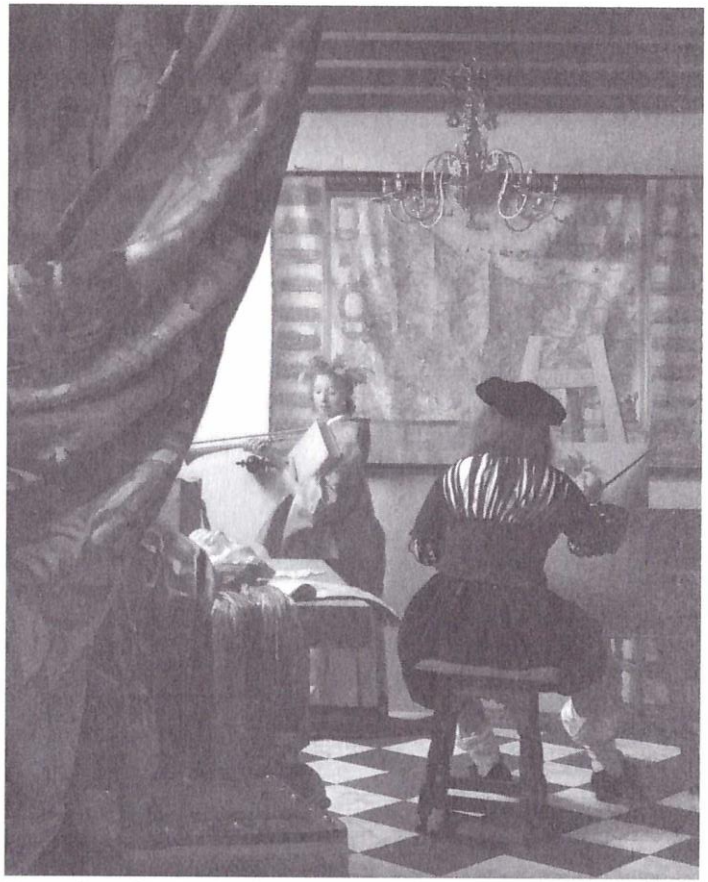
of his worldly success, makes a great deal from a potentially tedious subject. His brief in 1632 was to paint a group portrait of the Amsterdam Guild of Surgeons. Earlier painters had grappled unhappily with the collection of bearded surgeons in dark suits. In his *Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp*, Rembrandt directs a mini-drama, setting the corpse of the dissected criminal at an angle and surrounding its torso with a conversational assembly of reactive individuals, whose expressions range from surprised awe to complacent awareness.

In fact, the narrative is contrived. The standard order of dissection (determined by rate of putrefaction) was abdomen, brain or thorax and finally the limbs. Tulp is anomalously shown beginning with the muscles and tendons that operate the hand. He is demonstrating the flexor tendons, and we can clearly see in the fingers how the superior tendon bifurcates to anchor in the inferior tendon, a mechanism regarded as one of the wonders of God's engineering. Tulp is using his own left hand to demonstrate how this mechanism achieves the delicate gripping action of the opposed thumb and forefinger. As a pioneer of the study of primates, Tulp was demonstrating how our hand, known as 'the instrument of instruments', defines our uniquely human gifts. Rembrandt is of course at the same time overtly displaying his 'artist's hand'. The shadows, in the tradition of Caravaggio, are more penumbral than in Rubens, while pools of light are more selectively abrupt. Rubens endows violence with stylishness and grace, while Rembrandt colours the learned research of middle-aged men with the polar emotions of tranquillity and turmoil.

The Dutch effectively invented genre painting as a major branch of the pictorial arts, and in the hands of Johannes Vermeer it became a vehicle for the refined contemplation of optical magic and social decency. In his bourgeois interiors, suffused with pale light, he meticulously locates well-attired ladies, gentlemen, their servants and their furniture on chequerboard floors. They act like decorous chess pieces in quiet games of music-making, letter reading, restrained courtship and domestic duty. What looks like detailed description is a trick in which we are perceptually implicit. Generalised planes of colour, interspersed with little pearls, worms and puddles of reflected light, persuade us to see more than is there. The synthesis of light, colour and space almost certainly indicates Vermeer's use of optical devices like the camera obscura – the 'dark chamber' with a small aperture that forms an image on a light screen.

We may feel the camera's effect even where it is not used directly, as in his *Art of Painting* from the mid-1660s. It may be that the heavy curtain signals the way he darkened the end of a room to transform it into life-size camera obscura. The painter with brush and mahl stick has just begun to portray Clio, the muse of history, with her book and the trumpet that heralds fame. The cast of a large sculpted face lies discarded on the table as if to say that anything sculpture can do painting does better. The magnificent map behind Clio, strafed into relief by the raking light, is Claes Janszoon's Visscher's cartographic description of the less than wholly united Provinces, flanked by pictorial vignettes of the main cities. The painting is deeply about acts of seeing and representation, and a vivid demonstration of the

gentlemanly art of painting. Vermeer retained the painting until his death and it clearly meant much to him. However, there is no case for thinking that he actually worked in such finery and without the necessary clutter of painting materials. It is a living miracle of the *art* of painting, not a realistic description of the *act* of painting.



Vermeer, *The Art of Painting*, c.1666–8

The Dutch also redefined other ways of painting nature. Accomplished landscape, animal and seascape painters ennobled the everyday, the rural and the marine. Jacob van Ruisdael's *Windmill at Wijk bij Duurstede* is an example of how land, sea and sky can evoke the daily drama of existence as profoundly as any religious narrative. The windmill, translator of insistent Dutch winds into economic power, stands proudly near the bank of the broad inland waterway, towering over the more distant Castle of Wijk. Clouds scud overhead. Two trade vessels wait on the flat waters. Three women walk a curved path to the small town behind the ridge. The Netherlands was built on water-born power, and engaged in a constant battle to protect and reclaim the 'Low Countries' from the encroaching seas. It is a moist

Ruisdael, *Windmill at Wijk bij Duurstede*, c.1670

territory of big skies stretching to flat horizons, with orderly agriculture and neat brick townships. The particular speaks of the general: Ruisdael looks at a windmill to tell the story of somewhere that was and is unique.

Art became polarised in form and function. The diverse regimes of powerful states, ranging from the totalitarian monarchies of Catholic Spain and France to the complex bourgeois societies of Protestant Britain and the Netherlands, fostered types and scales of art that satisfied very different kinds of needs. A Ruisdael hanging in the town house of an Amsterdam merchant did a very different job from Bernini's St Theresa. What is generally shared across this wide spectrum is a growing social and intellectual ambition to make visual art something special in the annals of human culture.

5
CONNOISSEURSHIP AND CRITICISM

From *A Discourse on the Dignity, Certainty, Pleasure and Advantage of the Science of the Connoisseur*, 1719, by Jonathan Richardson, painter and collector:

There are Few that pretend to be Connoisseurs, *and of those Few the number of Such as Deserve to be so call'd is very Small: 'Tis not enough to be an Ingenious Man in General, nor to have seen all the Finest things in* Europe, *nor even to be able to Make a good Picture, Much less the having the Names, and something of the History of the Masters: All This will not make a man a good* Connoisseur, *To be able to judge of the Goodness of a Picture, most of those Qualifications are necessary, which the Painter himself ought to be possessed of …; He must be Master of the Subject, and if it be Improveable he must know it is so … He must be acquainted with the Passions, their Nature, and how they appear on all Occasions. He must have a Delicacy of Eye to judge of Harmony, and Proportion, of Beauty of Colours, and Accuracy of Hand; and Lastly he must be conversant with the Better Sort of People, and with the Antique, or he will not be a good Judge of Grace, and Greatness. To be a good* Connoisseur … *a Man must be as free from all kinds of Prejudice as possible; He must moreover have a Clear, and Exact way of Thinking, and Reasoning; he must know how to take in, and manage just Ideas; and Throughout he must have not only a Solid, but an Unbias'd Judgment. These*

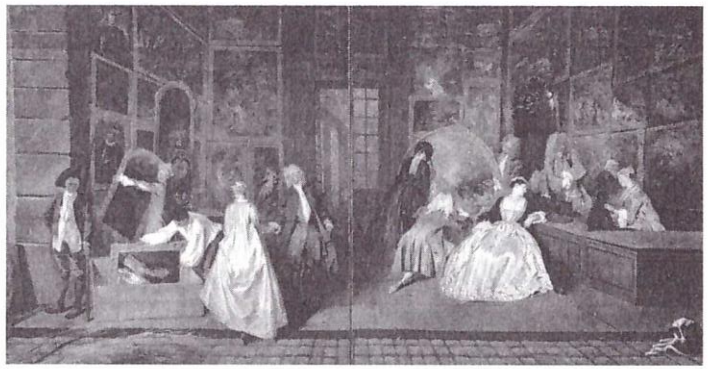
> *are the Qualifications of a* Connoisseur; *And are not These, and the Exercise of Them, well becoming a Gentleman?*

For artists to convince themselves of their intellectual merit, elevated purpose and high social status was one thing; to convince a broader swathe of educated society was another. This is where the connoisseur comes in – and eventually the art critic. A characteristic development of the eighteenth century was the rise of the expert who by dint of sensibility, practice and knowledge could bring an accomplished eye to bear on questions of visual quality. The connoisseur could tell the superb from the very good, the original from a copy. The last of these was a powerful motivating factor for Jonathan Richardson, in the face of the large volumes of imported paintings claiming to be by one great master or another. Who could guide the eager collector of 'old masters' – as when 'a Drawing, or Picture be offered to him as being of the Hand of the Divine Rafaelle?':

> If this Judicious *Connoisseur* sees in it no Fine Thought, no Just, nor Strong Expression, no Truth of Drawing, no Good Composition, Colouring, or Handling; in short neither Grace, nor Greatness; but that on the contrary 'tis Evidently the Work of some Bungler, the Confident Pretences concerning it impose not on Him; He knows it Is not, it Cannot possibly be of *Rafaelle.*'

Richardson was a skilled painter as well as a collector, but the connoisseur could be an *amateur*; someone not professionally involved in producing art but who had cultivated refined skills in judgement. Being an *amateur* came to have a special social cachet. The pioneer Parisian dealer,

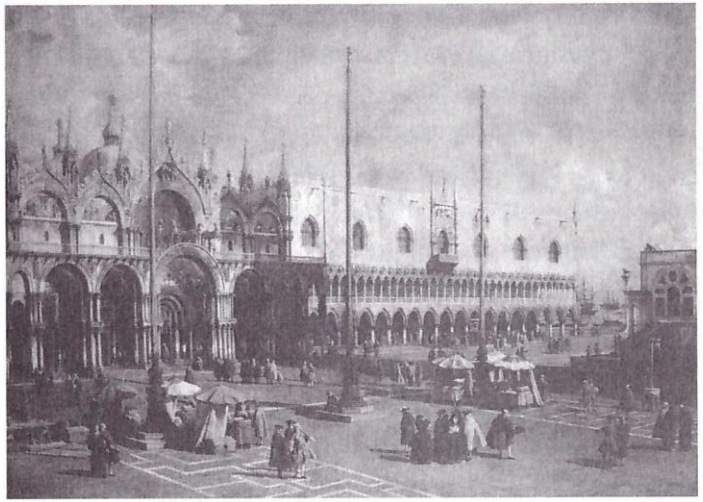
Edme-François Gersaint, claimed that the knowledgeable art lover could aspire in sensibility to become 'the equal of those superior in rank and condition'. The discernment of quality was all: 'a genuine *amateur*, or I should say, a true connoisseur, is less concerned with a painter's name and the rarity of his paintings than with the quality of his work'.



Watteau, *The Gersaint Shop Sign*, 1721

Gersaint was a new kind of art man. From his premises on the Pont de Notre-Dame, he sold paintings and curious artefacts. He staged public auctions, issuing catalogues with informative essays and frontispieces designed by leading artists. It is in a catalogue from 1734 that Gersaint tells us the origin of his famous *Shop-Sign* by Jean-Antoine Watteau, a masterpiece capturing transactions between the new connoisseur-collectors and enterprising merchants meeting their demands.

Gersaint tells how the ailing painter, who was in terminal decline with tuberculosis, offered to paint an 'overdoor' for the dealer's rebuilt premises in 1720. Gersaint argued that a shop sign was not the most prestigious form of art



Canaletto, *Square of S Marco, Venice*, c. 1742–4

great 'byzantine' basilica of San Marco, the Doge's Palace steps back diagonally in meticulous though gentle perspective, opposite a column carrying the lion of St Mark and towards the maritime *basino* with its gracious gondolas and ornate galleons. The 'Serene Republic' gleams. Costumed actors play their parts, interspersed with stallholders and just one token beggar in the portal. The smaller details are captured with little dots, squiggles and commas of paint in a miraculous shorthand as economical as Vermeer's but more self-consciously ornate. Now in Washington, the painting was originally a prized asset of Castle Howard in Yorkshire.

The artist who most pointedly pricked the balloon of pretence that often prevailed in these arty circles was, surprisingly, English. The surprise is not that William Hogarth's 'modern moral subjects' should emerge from English political and literary culture but that an English artist

should effectively invent a new genre when his immediate predecessors had not proved notably adept at the old ones – with the possible exception of portraiture. Satire was a major political tool and literary genre in eighteenth-century Britain. Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* is a major literary example. Hogarth did not emerge from the established art world. He began as an engraver of politically angled prints before turning to painting.

While Hogarth developed into an accomplished painter of portraits and traditional narratives, it was his commentaries on modern manners that brought him fame. Two series narrate the short-lived rise and merited fall of a central character. We follow the *Harlot's Progress* in six scenes in 1731, and four years later we witness the *Rake's Progress* in eight pictures. Each painting was engraved and

Hogarth, *The Tête à Tête, Marriage à la Mode no. 2*, c.1743

the sets were sold lucratively on subscription. The third series in 1743–5 was *Marriage à-la-mode* (a Frenchified title) in which we watch the murderous disintegration of an arranged marriage between old aristocracy and new money.

In the second painting in the series, *Tête à Tête* (page 93), we peep at the morning after the wedding night, which has not, seemingly, resulted in the consummation of the marriage. The setting is a salon opening on to a picture gallery. The son of the bankrupt Earl Squanderfield slumps in debauched lassitude. A fluffy dog sniffs out the disgrace that the bridegroom has preferred to pass his wedding night with a woman of easy virtue, whose bonnet hangs from his pocket. His bride, to judge from her stretch and sneer, has found alternative satisfaction in the arms of a lover. The upturned chair and scattered items of frivolous entertainment tell their own story, while the despairing estate manager exits with a ledger of unpaid bills. As if this is not enough, the young man's neck is marked with the sign of the 'French pox' that he has acquired on previous expeditions.

Hogarth places his contemporary moral tracts alongside the great cycles of 'history paintings' revered in the academies. He was involved in the early teaching establishments in London, including the St Martin's Lane Academy, and produced his own treatise, *The Analysis of Beauty*, in 1753. In all this, he was little concerned to parrot the traditional dogmas, seeking something more direct and less inflated. As the key to beauty he looked not to a philosophically informed ideal but to a particular kind of serpentine line that experience of nature and art attests as

the essence of the beautiful. It should be added that Hogarth handles paint with a detailed panache to stand beside Watteau and Canaletto.

At this time the Academy in France was dominated by painting less monumentally serious than in the era of Le Brun. The taste, above all of the royal court, was set by a painter of modest origins who had engraved Watteau's compositions, François Boucher. He is the Rococo artist par excellence. The name Rococo (related to the English word 'rockery') was coined in the nineteenth century to refer to the sinuous and florid decoration characterising French design in the mid-eighteenth century. Curvaceous marine and plant forms provided important inspiration. Gersaint dealt in natural wonders, and Boucher's trade card for Gersaint's establishment, *A la Pagode*, parades a rich array of curious items, including a Chinese cabinet, exotic corals and ornamental shells.

Boucher emerged with a series of large mythological canvases in the early 1730s. The paintings do not seem to have been lucrative commissions but were intended to bring the young painter to the attention of connoisseurs, which they did to great success. The *Rape of Europa* (overleaf) shows Boucher's buoyant flair. He is recounting a story from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* of how the lustful Jupiter disguised himself as a bull: 'the muscles rounded out his neck, the dewlaps hung down in front, the horns were twisted, but one might argue they were made by hand, purer and brighter than pearl. His forehead was not fearful, his eyes were not formidable, and his expression was peaceful'. Thus fooled, the beautiful Europa and virginal companions gambol on

the shore with the benign beast. Jupiter's eagle in the upper right serves as a portent. Once seated on the animal's back, Europa is born helplessly to Crete, where she is raped. Boucher does not neglect the narrative, but the dancing composition, light-hued colours, luscious paint handling, and general air of frolicking joy are not designed to stimulate dark thoughts about Jupiter's rapacious intentions. Le Brun would not have approved of Boucher's appointment as 'First Painter to the King' in 1765.

Given the high seriousness inherent in French academic art, we might imagine that Boucher could look frivolous. Denis Diderot, prodigious philosopher, playwright, novelist, essayist and encyclopedist, and effectively the first art

Boucher, *The Rape of Europa*, c. 1732–4

critic, certainly thought so. From 1759 and 1779, Diderot wrote brilliantly conversational reviews of the Salons, the regular exhibitions staged by the Academy in the Louvre. His touchstones were nature and sincerity, and Boucher did not measure up in either respect. Diderot opens his attack on Boucher in 1765: 'I do not know what to say about this man. The degradation of taste, color, composition, has been followed little by little by the degradation of morals'. He recognised Boucher's charm, but this only served to make him more dangerous, because the painter 'has nothing of truth'.

Not the least important aspects of Diderot's entertaining squibs was that they did not respect the traditional hierarchy of the genres; the ranking of painting which placed 'history painting' at the summit of seriousness, with portraiture, 'low-life' painting, landscapes, animals and still life in a descending order. In fact, each genre was pursued with considerable verve in the Salons. One of Diderot's heroes was the quiet painter of domestic scenes and lowly still lifes, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin. He recognised that Chardin's subjects were not elevated. However, their supreme and honest naturalness transcended their social limits. What they could not do was summon up the full range of emotions Diderot demanded of the highest art.

Diderot opens the *Essay on Painting* that is appended to his Salon of 1765 with the declaration, 'Nature does not make anything inappropriately. Every form, beautiful or ugly, has its cause'. When he states that 'Chardin is true, so true' and that his work is 'nature itself', he is offering no small praise. Diderot could look towards Pliny for support in his admiration for eye-catching naturalism. The discoveries of

beguiling Roman still-life painting in Herculaneum and Pompeii also helped legitimise the genre.

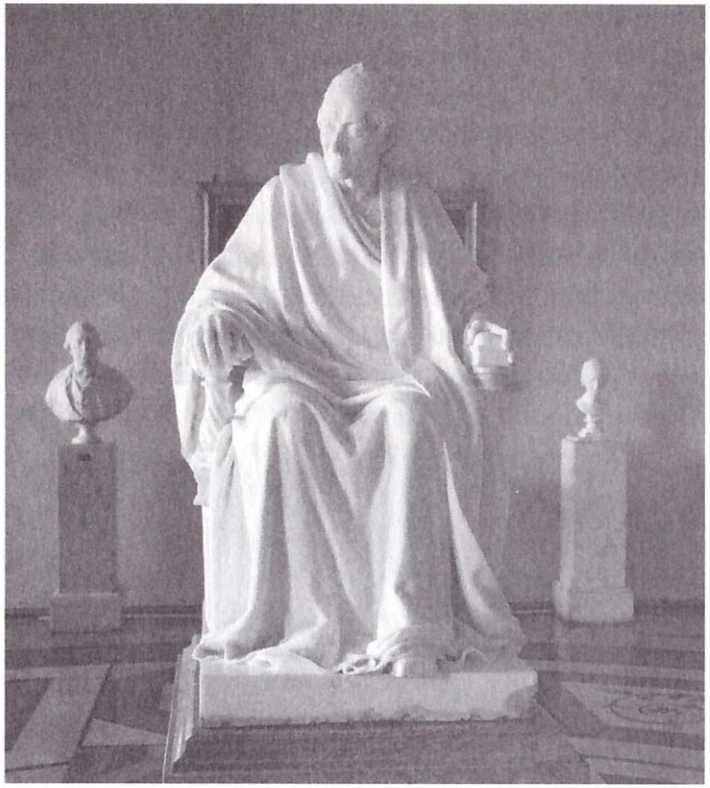
The painting illustrated here is one of Chardin's contemplative genre paintings, undertaken before Diderot was writing his *Salons*. It draws upon the genteel bourgeois society into which the painter was integrated. Chardin depicts in close-up a young tutor instructing a girl. The painting is a miracle of eloquent and restrained precision. The tender yet prissy delicacy of the teacher's profile is translated into the steely gleam of the hatpin with which she points to the open book. The child's blunt face and stubby

Chardin, *The Young Schoolmistress*, c. 1735–6

hand serve as counterpoints. Chardin exploits his unique kind of clotted surface, like unglazed ceramic, to create open surfaces that somehow become flesh and drapery. Nothing is overtly *described*, but, like Vermeer, he cajoles our perception into seeing materials that are not there. Diderot was alert to the suggestive magic: 'thick layers of colour are applied one upon another, and their effect seeps through from the first layer to the last … Go closer, and the picture blurs, flattens out, and disappears. Step back, and it is created anew, takes shape again'. He says the paint seems to be breathed on to the canvas.

In case we should think that Chardin, this son of a cabinetmaker, was a simple visual craftsman of scenes from his life, we should note that he was the manager and treasurer of the Salon, receiving substantial rewards from the king. His verbal reticence in the historical record, as with that of Velásquez and Vermeer, does not signal a lack of intellectual sophistication or social ambition.

Diderot was one of a radical group of French intellectuals determined to reform philosophy, society and culture in France. Britain was a source of inspiration, above all for its nature-based philosophy and experimental science. Newton was hugely admired, not least by Voltaire, the prolific author, philosopher, historian and social reformer, who was an early source of inspiration for Diderot. The most vivid images of Voltaire are by Jean-Antoine Houdon, one of the greatest portrait sculptors from any period. Among his sitters was Benjamin Franklin. Perhaps the most compelling of the 'speaking likenesses' he produced of Voltaire is the life-size seated statue in the Hermitage, commissioned by



Houdon, *Voltaire*, 1781

Empress Catherine II in 1780. It was based on a terracotta sketch that was much admired in Houdon's studio, a sketch that was also used for a similar statue for the Comédie-Française in Paris.

Voltaire, aged and wiry, ensconced in an impressive chair, wears the gown of a venerable seer, which notably avoids becoming a Romanising toga. He turns his head to engage with an implied interlocutor. He smiles with quizzical shrewdness. The characterisation of his face

is naturalistic rather than conventionally antique. The normally blank or minimally described eyes of classical portraits have been replaced by excavated pupils with bright marble highlights. He sparkles with life. It is perhaps to be expected that Houdon was the author of brilliant portrait busts of Diderot, characterised with comparable living power.

Late in the day, Britain gained its official academy in 1768. The Royal Academy of Art was founded by George III, with Joshua Reynolds installed as its first president. High ambitions were reflected in the president's series of published *Discourses*, advocating the nobility of art through the emulation of the kind of history paintings of which Raphael remained the ultimate exponent. In spite

Reynolds, *Sir David Garrick between Comedy and Tragedy*, 1760–61

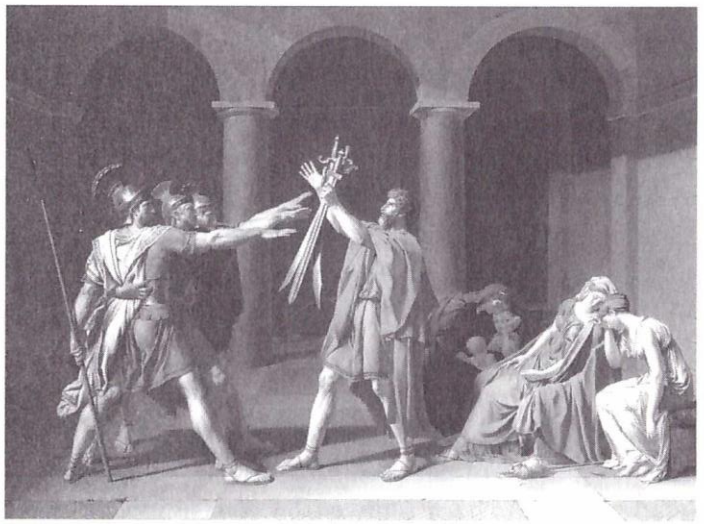
of the ideals, Reynolds's actual tastes remained lively and open in a way that was never submerged by academic dogmatism. In practice, Reynolds, like other leading academicians, depended on portraiture for the greater share of his patronage. Sometimes portraits could be blended with actual or implied narrative. This is shown in his 1761 portrait of the actor, David Garrick (page 101), torn between 'Comedy' and 'Tragedy'.

Reynolds's subject plays on the familiar ancient theme of Hercules at the cross-roads, in which the hero is confronted by two maidens, one of whom, plump and pink in a Boucherian manner, promises the seductive delights of a sweet and easy life, while the other, noble and austere, offers the bracing path of virtue. Hercules chose the latter. Garrick's choice is unclear. Pulled one way by a coquette, whose hair and costume are in anticipatory disorder, Garrick looks back with humorous remorse to the columnar woman pointing to higher things. The dagger at her belt belongs in a Greek or Shakespearean tragedy. 'But what can I do?' Garrick seems to be asking of her. In reality, Garrick was admired, by Diderot among others, for his ability to move from moods of joy to despair, from comedy to tragedy, transporting the audience across a full spectrum of emotions. He could have it both ways, even in the same play.

In 1789 the French monarchy was to move from Boucherian delight to Revolutionary tragedy, culminating in the execution of Louis XVI in 1793. The visual taste of the king's regime had been exemplified by Louis XV's mistress, Mme de Pompadour, who stood at the centre of a web of Rococo

extravagance. She was a major patron of Boucher. Significant moves against the Rococo were gaining impetus even before the Revolution. Lebrunian classical moralising was beginning to reassert its power in the Academy and at the Salon, in keeping with where things were going in France, as the monarchy came under increasing pressure for the kinds of reform that it could not accommodate.

The pre-Revolutionary transformation in the visual arts found its most unyielding expression in the paintings of Jacques-Louis David, who had studied in Rome for five years and who initially rose to prominence in royal circles. The painting that served to lay out his manifesto of reform at the Salon was his *Oath of the Horatii* in 1784. Gone is Boucher's ornamental froth. Three Roman brothers swear an oath to the fatherland as they salute the three swords



David, *Oath of the Horatii*, 1784

The Dutch also redefined other ways of painting nature. Accomplished landscape, animal and seascape painters ennobled the everyday, the rural and the marine. Jacob van Ruisdael's *Windmill at Wijk bij Duurstede* is an example of how land, sea and sky can evoke the daily drama of existence as profoundly as any religious narrative. The windmill, translator of insistent Dutch winds into economic power, stands proudly near the bank of the broad inland waterway, towering over the more distant Castle of Wijk. Clouds scud overhead. Two trade vessels wait on the flat waters. Three women walk a curved path to the small town behind the ridge. The Netherlands was built on water-born power, and engaged in a constant battle to protect and reclaim the 'Low Countries' from the encroaching seas. It is a moist

Ruisdael, *Windmill at Wijk bij Duurstede*, c.1670

territory of big skies stretching to flat horizons, with orderly agriculture and neat brick townships. The particular speaks of the general: Ruisdael looks at a windmill to tell the story of somewhere that was and is unique.

Art became polarised in form and function. The diverse regimes of powerful states, ranging from the totalitarian monarchies of Catholic Spain and France to the complex bourgeois societies of Protestant Britain and the Netherlands, fostered types and scales of art that satisfied very different kinds of needs. A Ruisdael hanging in the town house of an Amsterdam merchant did a very different job from Bernini's St Theresa. What is generally shared across this wide spectrum is a growing social and intellectual ambition to make visual art something special in the annals of human culture.