

More than Mimicry: The Parrot in Dutch Genre Painting

Published November 03, 2017

Kristen H. Gonzalez, *More than Mimicry: The Parrot in Dutch Genre Painting*, National Gallery of Art, <https://purl.org/nga/documents/literature/essays/more-than-mimicry-the-parrot-in-dutch-genre-painting> (accessed Nov 29, 2022).

Beautiful, exotic, and rare, parrots are a mainstay of 17th-century Dutch genre paintings. Appearing prominently in domestic interiors, taverns, and markets, these rare birds are painterly evidence of the vast and profitable trade network established by the newly independent Dutch Republic. Among an impressive array of luxury goods imported to the Low Countries, parrots were highly coveted. A wealthy and erudite clientele was eager to indulge its cultural curiosity and purchase such conspicuous symbols of prosperity. Parrots, however, were more than ostentatious displays of wealth and sophistication. These very social and intelligent creatures were, in fact, highly valued companions. As such, they provided Dutch genre painters an unprecedented opportunity for creativity and candor, on which they skillfully capitalized. The resulting works reveal personalities at play and unique perspectives into the private lives of Dutch citizens in the Golden Age.

The parrot's special status among the elite is evident in Caspar Netscher's painting *Woman Feeding a Parrot, with a Page* [fig. 1]. [1] As this young woman presents the bird to the viewer, a page boy enters the scene, directing his attention not to his mistress, but to the African grey perched on her finger. Netscher employed this species of parrot to good effect—the African grey (*Psittacus erithacus*) is the most intelligent of parrots. [2] Its commanding presence is a fitting complement to this young woman's confident and engaging demeanor.



Fig. 2 - Gerrit Dou, *Woman with a Parrot* (detail), c. 1660–1665, oil on panel, The Leiden Collection, New York, GD-105. © The Leiden Collection, New York

The comparatively chaste young woman in Gerrit Dou's *Woman with a Parrot* removes a blue-fronted Amazon parrot (*Amazona aestiva*) from the dome-topped birdcage she grasps in her other hand [fig. 2]. In the symbolic language of Dutch art, a bird in a cage was often seen as a visual metaphor for conjugal felicity, whereas a bird leaving a cage was seen as representative of freedom from sexual restraints. [3] The young woman in Dou's painting restrains the parrot by its talon, using her thumb and middle finger, suggesting that she is tempted by love, yet remains cautious about embracing sexual freedom (see detail of fig. 2). [4] Dou's characterization of her uncertainty is wonderfully subtle and articulated discreetly through her interaction with the parrot.



Fig. 3 - Frans van Mieris, *The Duet* (detail), 1658, oil on panel, Staatliches Museum Schwerin/ Ludwigslust/ Güstrow. bpk | Staatliches Museum Schwerin | Elke Walford

Frans van Mieris, Gerrit Dou's pupil, may well have owned the African grey parrot he depicted in *The Duet*, as it is so convincingly rendered [fig. 3]. The parrot is perched on a multitiered stand, unencumbered by the constraints of a cage, and rendered in a languid state of contentment echoing that of his owners, its feathers ruffled and eyelids heavy—behavior which this often skittish species would not exhibit in the company of strangers (see detail of fig. 3).

The graceful, elongated profile of the beautiful woman in this work seems to mesmerize all the figures in the room, as she stands with one hand on the keyboard in front of her. With the other, she gently turns the page of the musical score. Plucking the chords of the theorbo-lute, her male accompanist inclines his head toward her with the hint of an amorous smile playing on his lips. The sensuous harmony in this scene is palpable, and the exotic parrot contributes significantly to this endeavor.



Fig. 4 - Frans van Mieris, *Woman Feeding a Parrot* (detail), 1663, oil on panel, The Leiden Collection, New York, FM-112. © The Leiden Collection, New York

Van Mieris's keen powers of observation and artistic sensibility reach its epitome in *Woman Feeding a Parrot* [fig. 4]. Here the artist infuses the scene with tenderness, and even humor. Showcasing his talent, this *fijnschilder* painter patiently observes and sensitively renders these figures in layer upon layer of paint, [5] revealing their emotions, as well as his own. The model in this engaging image is Van Mieris's wife, Cunera van der Cock. [6] Seen in profile, she is oblivious to our presence as viewers and, by extension, to her husband behind the easel. The grey parrot shows little interest in the treat Cunera offers him. [7] The thimble on her finger indicates she was engaged in needlework, which her beloved pet has interrupted in a plea for attention (see detail of fig. 4). The parrot's head is bowed and slightly arched, and the feathers at the crest of his neck are just about to rise in supplication for her to stroke. He pleads with the pinning of his eyes for her to release the other hand, curled against the ermine fur of her mantle and holding the linen strewn across her lap. Her thoughtful expression indicates she will acquiesce, put aside her task, and indulge her beloved pet. While similar compositions extol the virtues of the docile, diligent woman focused intently on her task at hand, [8] Van Mieris celebrates humanity and the distractions from routine, part of the universal appeal

of this painting.

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1



fig. 2 Gerrit Dou, *Woman with a Parrot*, c. 1660–1665, oil on panel, The Leiden Collection, New York, GD-105. © The Leiden Collection, New York



fig. 3 Frans van Mieris, *The Duet*, 1658, oil on panel, Staatliches Museum Schwerin/ Ludwigslust/ Güstrow. bpk | Staatliches Museum Schwerin | Elke Walford
NOTES



fig. 4 Frans van Mieris, *Woman Feeding a Parrot*, 1663, oil on panel, The Leiden Collection, New York, FM-112. © The Leiden Collection, New York

- [1] Thomas Boehrer is one of a select group of art historians to address the parrot in the history of art, and he notes the significantly different role the parrot plays in Dutch genre painting. He observes that these birds “enter into a special relationship with their owners . . . placing them in a sense inside the family unit,” in *Parrot Culture: Our 2,500-Year-Long Fascination with the World’s Most Talkative Bird* (Philadelphia, 2004), 19.
- [2] This species has been extensively studied by Harvard cognitive behavioral scientist Irene Pepperberg. Her research reveals that the intelligence of the African grey rivals that of a five-year-old child and the most advanced animal primates. Her parrot, Alex, learned to count and add (understanding the numerical concept of zero), could identify shapes and colors, and held an extensive vocabulary. Dr. Pepperberg established that the size of the brain did not correspond to its ability to function. The term “bird brain” is, indeed, a misnomer, and the common belief that the grey’s speech is mere mimicry has been challenged by its cognitive abilities, which reveal contextual

application of speech and the understanding of cause and effect. For a list of Dr. Pepperberg's publications, see <http://alexfoundation.org/about/dr-irene-pepperberg/>.

- [3] E. de Jongh provides a comprehensive analysis of illustrated emblem books from the 17th century in conjunction with contemporary paintings featuring the birdcage. He underscores the amorous nature in which the bird and the cage appear. See "A Bird's-Eye View of Erotica: Double Entendre in a Series of Seventeenth-Century Genre Scenes," in *Questions of Meaning: Theme and Motif in Dutch Seventeenth-Century Painting*, trans. and ed. Michael Hoyle (Leiden, 2000), 43–46. In addition, numerous examples of this cage exist, often suspended from the ceiling of interiors in the center of the room, as in Gerrit Dou, *Lady at Her Toilet*, 1667, Museums Boijmans van Beuningen (cat. 4.1), and Gerrit Dou, *Woman at the Clavichord*, c. 1665, Dulwich Picture Gallery, London (cat. 7.3), in Adriaan Waiboer, Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., and Blaise Ducos, eds., *Vermeer and the Masters of Genre Painting* (New Haven, 2017).
- [4] A close examination of the bird's feet reveal that one foot is obscured from view and the foot in the foreground features only two digits of the talon. Parrot feet are zygodactyl and therefore feature two digits in front and two in back. Digit four is the only one clearly in view. Terri Brittin, "Fossil Groups: Psittaciformes," University of Bristol Palaeobiology Research Group, November 11, 2016, <http://palaeo.gly.bris.ac.uk/Palaeofiles/Fossilgroups/psittaciformes/Characters.html>.
- [5] Van Mieris's technique in painting this work has been eloquently described by Melanie Griffith. She states, "Van Mieris' impenetrable, enamel-like surface must have required continuous paint layers in both the final paint and the underpainting below," in "Fine Painting and Eloquent Imprecision: Gabriel Metsu's Painting Technique," in *Gabriel Metsu*, ed. Adriaan E. Waiboer (National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2010), 176–177 and figs. 138, 140. This enamel-like surface is entirely appropriate for the depiction of the African grey, due to the presence of the uropygial gland, "[which] is the most prominent epidermal gland in birds and produces a waxy oily secretion via two or more ducts. This oil is spread through the plumage during preening." Neil A. Forbes, in *Avian Medicine*, ed. Jaime Samour, 3rd ed. (Saint Louis, 2016), <http://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/veterinary-science-and-veterinary-medicine/uropygial-gland>.
- [6] The resemblance of this model to Van Mieris's wife has been noted in several works, most recently by Quentin Buvelot in his entry, "Young Woman Feeding a Parrot," ed. Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. (New York, 2017), https://www.theleidencollection.com/archives/artwork/FM_112_frans_van_mieris_woman_feeding_a_parrot_2017.pdf?ch=6457980; and earlier by Otto Naumann in "Frans van Mieris as a Draughtsman," *Master Drawings* 16, no. 1

(1978): 25, in no. 2. See also Quentin Buvelot, ed., *Frans van Mieris 1635–1681* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2005), 163.

- [7] As astutely observed by Quentin Buvelot in Walter Liedtke and Arthur K. Wheelock Jr., eds., *Johannes Vermeer: Il secolo d'oro dell'arte olandese* (Scuderie del Quirinale, 2012), 170–171, no. 32.
- [8] Compositions featuring women at needlework with parrots have been widely interpreted. Wayne E. Franits emphasizes the domestic significance of such “demure maidens” in *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (Cambridge, UK, 1993), 205. E. de Jongh places significant emphasis on eroticism in his reading of the parrot as well as other birds in “A Bird’s-Eye View of Erotica: Double Entendre in a Series of Seventeenth-Century Genre Scenes,” in *Questions of Meaning: Theme and Motif in Dutch Seventeenth-Century Painting*, trans. and ed. Michael Hoyle (Leiden, 2000), 22–46.