

Mennonite Women and Seventeenth Century Dutch Art: A Feminist Analysis

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The idea of bringing a feminist analysis to the subject of Mennonite women and Dutch seventeenth century art came about as a result of Roy Loewen's invitation to speak at the conference *EnGendering the Past: Women and Men in Mennonite History*, held at the University of Winnipeg in October, 1998. I teach at the University in both the Art History and Women's Studies Programs and gradually my interest in feminist theory has begun to inform my practice as an art historian. Seventeenth century Dutch art is one of the areas I teach and also a field in which the history of women, and women artists, has been explored. So it seemed reasonable to approach Mennonite history, coming as an outsider from the field of Mennonite Studies, to create an interdisciplinary space among the three fields.

My introduction to scholarship in Mennonite art and history began with Piet Visser and Mary Sprunger's *Menno Simons: Places, Portraits and Progeny*, a study which proved to be a valuable source of illustrations: many of them portraits and self-portraits, often in an everyday setting.¹ Many images from the art historical canon with which I was already familiar were here identified as belonging to the category "Mennonite" by virtue of either or both their content and their authorship. This label of religious denomination is not one that is usually foregrounded in discussions of these works or of the artists who made

them. I realized that through the lens of Mennonite history I could enjoy a new perspective on the production and subject matter of Dutch seventeenth century art, a point of view from which certain types of images and historical figures can be seen in a different way. Coming from a community on the margins, Mennonite scholarship helps to reveal the hegemonic structures, the androcentricity, elitism and ethnocentricity of art history itself as a discipline.

Another book that framed my approach to this topic was Arnold Snyder and Linda Huebert Hecht's *Profiles of Anabaptist Women*.² These accounts of heroic women's lives provided me with an appreciation for the radical struggle of sixteenth century Anabaptists and the value that spiritual independence had for Mennonite women.

Studies of women's history in sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe have given us new insights into the economic and social conditions that inform the production of art as well as women's lives: the work of Joan Kelly-Gadol, Joan Scott and Merry Wiesner has been particularly helpful in providing a historical context for my observations.³ Janet Wolff's feminist analysis of cultural history has offered a clear conceptual framework,⁴ and the feminist methodologies of Charlotte Bunch and Sandra Harding describe praxes that I have tried to follow.⁵

For the purposes of this paper, my sources in the traditional art historical literature are focussed on the study of seventeenth century Dutch genre painting, or the depiction of scenes from everyday life, in which women frequently appear.⁶ In recent years there have also been important monographs and exhibitions of rediscovered seventeenth century Dutch women artists who have been added to the canon.⁷ But it is not enough to simply expand the list; feminist writers on art such as Linda Nochlin, Griselda Pollock and Roszika Parker have made considerable contributions to the analysis of the patriarchal structures that have determined not only how women have been depicted in visual art, but also of the constraints on the participation of women in the training, production, patronage and criticism of art, and the writing of art history itself.⁸

At first the problem in this paper appears to be two-fold: first there is the consideration of gender as a category of analysis in the representation of women in seventeenth century Dutch art, and then there is the question of whether any Mennonite women can be identified as practising artists during that period in the Netherlands. But as Griselda Pollock explains in her essay on "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," the study of women in art as subjects and as artists demands an analysis of "mutually inflecting" power relations of gender and class.⁹ She continues:

The historical recovery of data about women producers coexists with and is only critically possible through a concomitant deconstruction of the discourse and practices of art history itself. ... We have to refute the lies that there were no women artists, or that the women artists who are admitted are second-rate and that the reason for their indifference lies in the all-pervasive submission to an indelible femininity—always proposed as unquestionably a disability in making art. ... To

avoid the embrace of the feminine stereotype which homogenizes women's work as determined by natural gender, we must stress the heterogeneity of women's art work, the specificity of individual producers and products. Yet we have to recognize what women share—as a result of nurture not nature, i.e. the historically variable systems which produce sexual differentiation.¹⁰

In this paper I hope to survey the presence of Mennonite women in the visual culture of seventeenth and early eighteenth century Dutch culture and to suggest some possible avenues for further research and analysis. Mennonites appear to have widely participated in the production and commissioning of art; moreover, their artistic practice does not seem to have largely differed from the mainstream. In individual and double portraits and in paintings of family groups Mennonite women are depicted as self-contained, confident and wealthy members of an urban elite. Bourgeois values of domesticity, maternal devotion, moral rectitude and submission to male authority determine the representation of Mennonite women in much the same way as they do in images of other Dutch women of the same class and mentality, whatever church they belonged to. There appears to be a sober portrait type especially reserved for certain members of the community which differs from the more fashionable society portrait. Two Mennonite women who were even internationally famous in their own lifetimes emerge as significant figures in the art world of Amsterdam. An examination of the class and gender issues that inform the art production of Joanna Koerten within the historical context of her career will serve as an example of how Pollock's critique can provide useful insight into our understanding of the construction of myths of femininity and high art.

Let me begin with images in which Mennonite women are depicted: a few examples will serve to show the range and nature of those representations and their iconography. A *Baptismal Scene* from L. Hortensius' *Van den Oproer der Weder-Dooperen*, published at Enkhuizen in 1624, is illustrated in Visser and Sprunger: it shows a woman and a man receiving the sacrament of adult baptism.¹¹ This image, (the original seventeenth century engraving survives in the copies of the book that have been preserved in libraries), is a visual document of the period that can be examined as a piece of historical evidence, as are the verbal texts of the time, in its own right. Images such as this can provide details of the setting, clothing, gesture and relationship of the persons depicted that might not otherwise be recorded. That is not to say that such images, any more than verbal texts, can be expected to accurately reflect the past; but there is a rhetoric in the iconology of images that can be analysed and interpreted. In this case, the woman is about the same size as the man and receives the sacrament alongside him. This is a visual reminder that from the beginning of the Anabaptist movement both women and men were baptised as adults and women had the freedom to follow their faith independently of their husbands.

Another example of this type of historical representation is Jan Luyken's *Female Anabaptist Martyrs* from T. J. van Braght's *Het Bloedigh Tooneel, of Martelaers Spiegel der Doops-gesinde of Weereloose Christensen*, published in



Fig. 1 Jan Luyken, *Female Anabaptist martyrs*, engraving from T. J. van Bragt's *Het Bloedigh Tooneel, of Martelaers Spiegel der Doops-gesinde of Weerlose Christensen*, Amsterdam, 1685. Mennonite Library, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Amsterdam. (Photo: courtesy Amsterdam University Library)

1685.¹² (Fig. 1) Here the persecution of women is depicted: they are being burned at the stake in the town square. It is interesting to note that a companion engraving from the same edition of Bragt's "Martyrs' Mirror" shows the martyrdom of male *Anabaptist Martyrs*: in this case the male figures are being beheaded.¹³ There is a gender difference here in the manner of execution that bears examination: the burning of women for their religious faith reminds us of the burning of women as witches for other so-called "crimes" in the sixteenth century persecution of women.

While the images of Mennonite women produced by Mennonites for Mennonite consumption celebrate their piety or their martyrdom, others reveal the hostility of the dominant community despite the freedom of worship that followed the Union of Utrecht after 1579. A series of washed pen drawings from 1640 by Pieter Jacobsz van Laer take as their subject Jan Starter's poem *Mennonite Courtship* of 1623.¹⁴ These verses were often illustrated; they tell the story of the perceived hypocrisy of a "Mennonite sister" who appears to be modest and pious but eventually succumbs to the temptations of the flesh. These drawings belong to the category of "genre" images, usually humorous and

moralizing scenes of the everyday life of ordinary people and even of the poor. These pictures of “low-life” were lower in the hierarchy of art production and also of less commercial value than other types of artwork, such as portraits. While Mennonites are rarely identified in such images, it is not surprising to find van Laer satirizing the Mennonite courtship, as women in general are especially and often depicted in sexually compromising situations.

Yet other images can be classified as political caricatures, such as the anonymous engraving, the *Kitchen of Religious Disputes*, printed by Willem Jansz Wijngaerts in Amsterdam between 1625 and 1632.¹⁵ Images such as this visually articulate certain concepts; they are allegorical works that are satirical or meant for instruction. In this scene women appear as visual symbols, as the personifications of abstract ideas. Think of all the traditional images of Justice or Vanity that are as ubiquitous as the women who appear in contemporary advertising as perfect mothers or seductresses. In this engraving, with its combination of text and images, the women are labelled to represent the concepts of Unity, Reason and Charity, whereas the men are portrayed and identified as Martin Luther, John Calvin, a Catholic and a Mennonite.

Another example of the abstraction and objectification of the female figure is found in an image meant for Mennonites: David Joris’ allegorical engraving of *The Bride of God* from his *Wonderboeck* of about 1582.¹⁶ Here a woman’s nakedness is transformed into the depersonalized form known to art historians as “the female nude.” Her appearance brings a subliminal eroticism to whatever abstract concept is being celebrated, in this instance the Church itself. This exploitation of the female body has been one of the most problematized areas of feminist research in art history.¹⁷ Mennonite authors were not immune to this treatment of the image of woman and in the Joris engraving the conventions of the dominant artistic mode of the culture have been adopted without question.

Mennonite women also appear in oil paintings, in particular as themselves in portraits. Portraits were often commissioned in pairs; the women appear in the pendants to portraits of their husbands. An example of this type is the portrait of *Feyna van Steenkiste* (1603/04–40), the pendant to the portrait of her husband Lucas de Clercq (c.1593–1652), painted in oil on canvas by the famed Haarlem portraitist, Frans Hals, in about 1635 and now in the Rijksmuseum.¹⁸ Steenkiste and her husband, a wealthy merchant with a linen-bleaching business, were members of the Vlaamse Block of the Flemish Mennonites.¹⁹ Her dress is suitably sober, but it is made of expensive-looking fabric and it is very fashionable: the projecting bands over the shoulders of her dress are the latest trend for the time. Such specific details of costume and the social connotations they imply in this type of portrait have been studied by Cynthia Kortenhorst-von Bogendorf Rupprath.²⁰

Feyna van Steenkiste’s portrait hangs on her husband’s left, the subordinate side, as do all female halves of paired portraits. The couple are turned toward each other but face the viewer; her hands are folded in front of her, but he poses with an authoritative hand on his hip. Many assistants and apprentices were

employed in the studios of the Dutch painters of the seventeenth century and it is not uncommon to find that while the master had executed the portrait of the husband, the portrait of the wife, being of lesser importance, might be painted wholly or in part by a subordinate artist.

A number of portraits of women by Hals and other painters of the period greatly resemble the portrait of Feyna van Steenkiste. For instance, Hals' *Portrait of a Seated Woman*, painted in 1633, shows the sitter in a similar black dress with white cuffs and a ruffled collar, although the bodice on this dress is fur-trimmed.²¹ But this woman has not been specifically identified as a Mennonite. Numerous other sitters, Calvinists, Lutherans, and other non-Mennonites, are represented by Hals and his contemporaries in a very similar manner. Often these sober women with their bibles or their wedding gloves can be identified as the wives of preachers, even as members of various denominations, but there doesn't seem to be a particular "Mennonite" type. We notice that in both the paintings of Feyna van Steenkiste and the unknown "seated woman" we find the same chair, a prop from Hals' studio. The black and white of the clothing, a convention in the United Provinces at the time, sets the tone of the work. The painters of this sober type of portrait concentrate on the potential for dramatic contrasts of light and dark; these paintings become virtuoso performances in black and white, opportunities for the artist to show off the sophisticated use of a limited colour palette. There is a focus on the "spot-lit" faces and hands for the expressive effects they offer, connoting the idealized spirituality of the sitters. Their rich garments and the opulent studio props glorify their self-images, commissioned and then hung in their own homes. These portraits become conventional, a type. It is often difficult to accurately identify the sitters, or their religious affiliation. Moreover, costume is notorious as a marker of the dating, artistic attribution or identification of subjects in art.

Mennonites would have benefited like any other group from the prestige conferred on them by owning such art objects, notwithstanding their avowed rejection of pride. The representation of the individual was intended to celebrate that person's success, or good works, in the community. The importance of Mennonite scholarship in this field to art historians in the further identification of sitters in these portraits cannot be overestimated, particularly in the recovery of specific names and archival records concerning the membership of the Mennonite churches.

Other portrait types exist alongside these images of respectable women, such as the equally prestigious portraits of glamorous society beauties, pendants to the portraits of their successful husbands, painted by prominent artists such as Hals. Mennonites do not seem to appear in this type of painting.

Sometimes couples are portrayed together in one painting, a double portrait that depicts a pair of sitters within the same setting. These images are almost "genre" paintings, or scenes from everyday life, except that the identity of the figures is specific. The possibility for creating a background full of associations in which to rhetorically situate the sitters is greatly enhanced by this strategy



Fig. 2 Jan de Bray, *Abraham Vincentsz Casteleyn (c.1628–81) and Margaretha van Bancken (?–1693)*, oil on canvas, 1663, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. (Photo: courtesy Rijksmuseum)

even a narrative can be suggested. In Frans Hals' *Couple in a Garden (Isaac Abrahamsz Massa and Beatrix van der Laan?)* of about 1622 we find a number of conventions that are common to this type of painting: the man is placed higher up in the picture space; the woman is on his left; the man holds the woman's hand; she leans towards him, engages him.²² They are associated with the natural landscape and so their relation to each other is seen as natural: he is the tree and she is the ivy that twines around the trunk. But Hals is not the first to construct this icon of marital harmony: the earlier *Self-Portrait with his Wife Isabella Brandt in a Honeysuckle Arbour* of 1609 by the Flemish Catholic painter Peter Paul Rubens is the probable antecedent to a long tradition of such conventional portraits of couples.²³

With their increasing prosperity, which Visser has described as the result of a reputation for honesty in business and the steady growth of financial capital due to the merging of close-knit families through marriage,²⁴ the Dutch Mennonites were able rise to the upper class and even to acquire the services of the portrait painters. The commissioned portrait was a prestigious testament to their ability to survive and succeed as Mennonites, "in the world but not of the world." Mennonite couples were also represented in this type of double portrait, in the tradition of Rubens and with the example of Hals as a model. One such example is the painting by Jan de Bray of *Abraham Vincentsz Casteleyn and Margaretha*

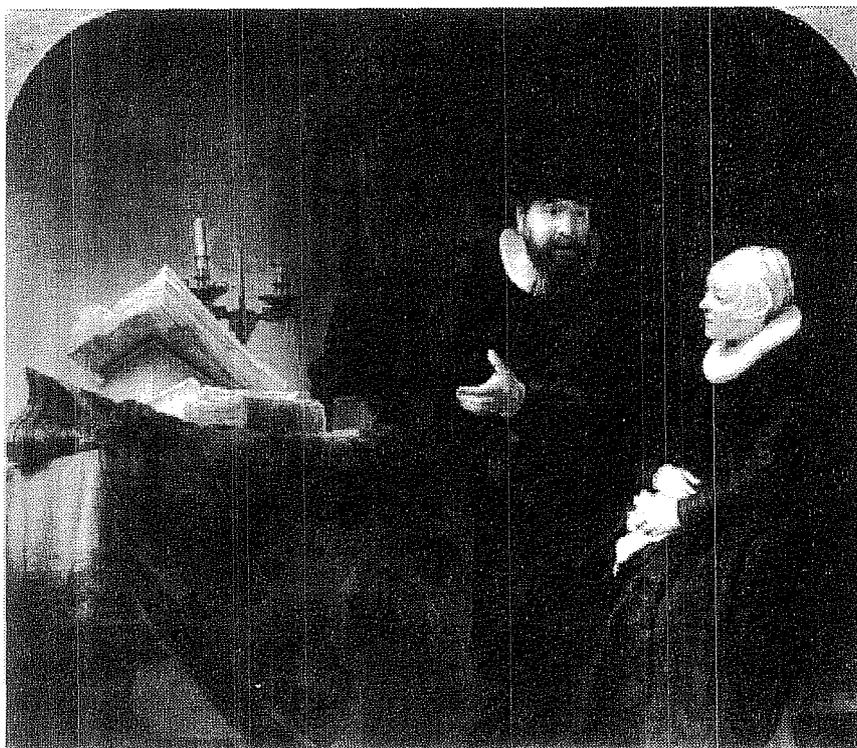


Fig. 3 Rembrandt, *Cornelis Claesz Anslo (1592–1646) and Aeltje Gerrits Schouten (1598–1657)*, oil on canvas, 1641, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin. (Photo: © bpk, Berlin, 1999, Jörg P. Anders, Gemäldegalerie)

van Bancken of 1663.²⁵ (Fig. 2) Casteleyn and his wife were Waterlanders of Haarlem. Casteleyn was the printer of a renowned newspaper that is still in print; we see the bust of Coster who had developed the printing industry in Haarlem above Casteleyn's head. There is also a globe on his right that represents his wide knowledge of the latest news from everywhere in Europe. When Casteleyn died his wife took over the family printing business.²⁶ This was the practice allowed by the trade guilds, that is, until a widow remarried. In many cases a widow married another man of the same profession so as not to lose the business completely, but then of course she would revert to a subservient role as an assistant to her new husband. The printing press had served the Mennonites well as a means of spreading their views in the sixteenth century, and we are reminded here of the courageous Anabaptist wives of printers who had risked and even lost their lives in order to keep the presses rolling during difficult times.

The conventions of nature and culture observed in the Hals double portrait mentioned above are clearly visible in this work of more than forty years later. The symbols of a happy marriage are naturalistically incorporated into the scene: he is contained by the architectural forms; she is nearer to the garden and

her left arm extends into the outdoor air where once again the ivy winds around a tree. Her pose reveals her dependent situation; he asserts his superior position with a didactic gesture towards the books that he is reading.

These conventions are even more pronounced in a work that became immediately famous because of its size, cost, and the celebrity of both the male sitter and the artist. Rembrandt's large double portrait of *Cornelis Claesz Anso and Aeltje Gerrits Schouten*, painted in 1641 and sometimes referred to as "The Mennonite Preacher and his Wife."²⁷ (Fig. 3) Perhaps this painting, because of its fame, also influenced Jan de Bray's portrait of Casteleyn and his wife. Cornelis Claesz Anso was a Waterlander preacher and an Elder; his church had lent Rembrandt a thousand guilders earlier in the same year. The Waterlanders were the most outwardly assimilated of the various Mennonite groups in the Netherlands and, in consequence, Waterlander preachers seem to have been more likely to have their portraits painted.²⁸ The couple are depicted wearing very rich clothing; we notice the furs and her delicate lace handkerchief highlighted against the dark silk taffeta and velvet textures of her dress. The books rest on a tasselled oriental rug. This is a scene of admonition as denoted by Anso's gesture to the open book and her expression of humility. A small iconographic detail helps to provide an interpretation for the scene: the scissors tucked beneath the candle are a conventional motif from the emblematic tradition of the time, a moralizing reminder to trim the candle wick and not waste the fat.²⁹ This is the lesson in which Anso may be instructing his wife as he gestures toward the books. In the contrast between their expensive clothes and the spiritual lesson, Rembrandt may be alluding to the moral dilemma, the "embarrassment of riches," to use Simon Schama's phrase, experienced by the comfortable and wealthy bourgeois class of Dutch seventeenth century society in the years that followed an earlier period of material lack and the previous generation's risk-taking devotion to radical ideas.

A third type of portrait in which members of the Mennonite community are represented is the family portrait. These paintings of parents and children reveal further conventions in the gendered representation of women and men, as for example in Egbert van Heemskerck's *Family of Jacob Fransz Hercules and Anna Jans ter Burgh* of 1669.³⁰ (Fig. 4) In the background a man reading can be identified as the Collegiant Mennonite Jan Knol and the painting itself was later bequeathed by family members to a Collegiant orphanage, "De Oranje Appel."³¹ This portrayal of a Mennonite family within the interior of their home and workplace presents an orderly division of labour: the barber-surgeon father teaches his younger son to bleed an older brother while other patients wait to be treated. The masculine area of the picture is filled with the signs of the father's occupation, his drugs and alchemical paraphernalia. His wife is placed in the feminine sphere to his left, with her children. She does some mending on her sewing cushion, sitting on a raised platform to keep the drafts away since she must sit almost motionless for long periods of time. Her daughter plays with a doll: the female child imitates the mother. The little dog, patiently seated, is a



Fig. 4 Egbert van Heemskerck, *Family of Jacob Fransz Hercules c. 1635–1708) and Anna Jans ter Burgh (c. 1634–1707)*, oil on canvas, 1669, Amsterdam Historical Museum, Amsterdam. (Photo: courtesy Amsterdams Historisch Museum)

sign for obedience and aptitude as defined in the emblem books and books of domestic conduct of the period. The best known of these manuals are the very popular books by Jacob Cats, but very similar Mennonite books of this type were also published, such as a domestic conduct book of 1677 by the Mennonite van Wormerveer which is mentioned by Wayne E. Franits.³² The accompanying texts and inscriptions on the images themselves throughout these books of emblems explicate the visual symbols.

Jacob Cats *Houwelijk* is a domestic conduct book with illustrations and texts that went through a great many editions.³³ In the engraved frontispiece, the *Maeghde-Wappen*, from the 1655 edition of *Houwelijk* we see two young women and a coat of arms, surrounded by a myriad of symbolic attributes. One young woman is accompanied by a sheep signifying simplicity as the banderole explains, and the other maiden carries her embroidery frame, and a little dog, contextually similar to the dog in Heemskerck's painting, is identified with the quality of aptitude, the ability to be trained. At her feet is a needlework cushion and a pair of cloth shears. I believe the shears have meaning too, as revealed by an image from Diego de Saavedra Fajardo's *Idea de un Principe Politico Christiano, representada en cien empresas*, published posthumously in Amsterdam in 1659.³⁴ The image of a bolt of cloth and a pair of shears is prefaced by the motto "Detrahit et Decorat," or cut and make fitting, not only in sense of the draper trimming the cloth, but spiritually. The exposition in the text accompanying the image contrasts admonition and discipline: admonition makes us good but discipline keeps us from evil. Needlework was seen as a discipline for girls and women, a preparation for marriage not only in terms of skill but also to learn humility, and to keep idle hands busy.

Another informative image from Cats' *Houwelijk* of 1632 is Adriaen van de Venne's illustration *Moeder*.³⁵ A family is gathered; each member is engaged in acting out their respective and gendered roles: the father is actively teaching his son to read and a painting easel stands behind them in the background, an easel and brushes at their feet. The mother passively sets a maternal example for her daughter as she nurses the baby and the daughter spansks her doll. Another daughter seated in the corner is making lace. There are a number of other family portraits mentioned by Visser that reveal the conventions described here, including Hendrick Sorgh's 1663 painting of the Bierens family preparing fish in the kitchen and Abraham Jacobsz van den Tempel's 1671 portrait of David Leeuw and his musical family.³⁶

Women occupied with sewing and other forms of needlework appear in many paintings and prints of the period, sometimes eroticized, sometimes moralized, but the femininity, docility, industry and silence connoted by their occupation is always signified. A series of engravings by Geertruid Rohgman, executed before 1650, show women and girls engaged in various kinds of needlework and household duties.³⁷ Rohgman is one of the women artists whose names have survived from this period, among growing numbers of forgotten women who are being rediscovered.

Sewing and other crafts are useful barometers of value in the variable relationship between class and gender. Gradually in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the professional craft of tailoring became the preserve of men as women were marginalized in the labour market and women's sewing became a domestic chore, or in wealthier circles, a decorative pastime. Certain so-called "feminine arts," such as embroidery, had been practised in earlier times by men and held a high place in the hierarchy of the arts. But because of the time-

consuming nature of the skilled work and the expense of the materials used, these media were disdained from the sixteenth century onwards by the dominant culture of male artists and their guilds. This gendering of art forms took place in response to the changing and often fluctuating market for art. In the increasingly capitalist society of the Netherlands art patronage was no longer the sinecure it had been under crown and papacy, but was now subject to the whims of fashion, largely dictated by the mercantile class. There was money and fame to be had as fundamentally cost-effective framed pictures in cheap oil paint loosely applied on canvas gained in popularity and value—it is estimated that between 1580 and 1800 approximately eight to ten million paintings were produced in the northern Netherlands.³⁸

In a painting by Quirijn van Brekelenkam, the *Interior of a Tailor's Shop*, dated 1653, men do the sewing as professional tailors.³⁹ They sit cross-legged on a table by the window, for the light but also as a sign of the world outside, while to their left a woman peels carrots by the fire, the home hearth. Spinning is another activity that varies as class and gender shift positions and there are similar images of men spinning while women clean vegetables.

Women's ability to endure and resist their housebound lives reveals itself in needlework: samplers could instruct women and girls in literacy and numeracy; personal expression found an avenue in the colours and designs handed down from mother to daughter. The patterns provided a creative language of form that could take on virtuosic and improvisational qualities. Most examples of needlework have been lost over the passage of time; everyday objects were usually meant to be used and were rarely saved or collected by museums. Some collections of needlework from the elite classes survive but they give us an incomplete picture of the culture. The more recent theory and practice of public history and social anthropology have influenced curatorial policy and consequently, historical textile collections of ordinary objects, though often not ordinary in terms of their execution or imagination, are now being established and studied.⁴⁰

Some examples of historical Mennonite embroidered textiles have survived in European so-called "folk art" collections, as well as in the North America. An *Embroidered Show Towel* by Mary Snyder from Waterloo County in Ontario and dating back to 1852 is illustrated in Michael Bird's *Canadian Folk Art*.⁴¹ This design contains some traditional Mennonite imagery of birds, hearts, and tulips - it would be interesting to trace these motifs back to their sources in sixteenth and seventeenth century images.

If we turn from the representation of Mennonites to the artists themselves, we find that there are many more men than women, and only a small number of well-known ones, as Linda Nochlin has so eloquently demonstrated.⁴² If we consider Mennonite artists in particular, again we find the proportion of men much larger. In researching this paper I have found no mention of any professional Mennonite women painters. Among the men it has been interesting for me to discover that eminent artists such as Karel van Mander, Samuel van

Hoogstraten, Jacob Adriensz Backer, Vincent Laurensz van der Vinne, Jan van der Heyden, Jan Luyken, Salomon Saverij, Salomon van Ruisdael and Michiel Jansz van Mierevelt were Mennonites and had successful careers and even had wealthy patrons outside the Mennonite community. There were Mennonite dealers and collectors as well, such as Rembrandt's patron Hendrick Uylenburgh. Mennonites also excelled in the arts of calligraphy and papercutting.⁴³ Karel van Mander is best known as an art theorist and biographer but he also painted biblical subjects. According to Miedema, van Mander's panel of the *Passage through Jordan* of 1605 has a personal religious significance.⁴⁴ It is difficult to say, however, whether his Mennonite faith influenced his art criticism. Most often the male Mennonite painters were portraitists but some also produced historical scenes and landscapes. Even some self-portraits by Mennonite men survive but, as in the case of Govert Flinck, these were executed prior to their joining the Mennonite community.⁴⁵

The number of women artists known to have painted, made prints, worked in glass and other media in the seventeenth century Netherlands is growing with research, as the names of daughter, wives, and sisters of male artists are found in the guild records. Among them we can count the artists Maria de Grebber, Sara van Baalbergen, Gerritje Jans, Geertruit van Veen, Anna Snellings, Sara Vrooms, Margaretha de Heer, Suzanna Gaspoel, Magdalene van d Passe, Anna Maria Koker, Catharyna Moyaerts, Maria van Pruyssen, Anna Splinters, Cornelia de Rijck, Eltje de Vlieger, Aleyda Wolfsen, Adriana Spilberg, Katharina Oostfries, Miss Rozee, Alida Withoos and Geertruid Gighman as well as the amateur painters Margaretha van Godewijk, Marie Schalcken, Margareta Maria de Roodere, and Gesina ter Borch.⁴⁶

One of the most renowned professional painters is Rachel Ruysch of Amsterdam who, as is case for most women artists of the time, belonged to a well-to-do family of artists. Usually a woman painter was taught by her father or she married an artist and worked alongside him, generally doing menial tasks, but occasionally a talent was fostered and the names as well as the works have survived. Ruysch's subject was exclusively the representation of extravagant flower arrangements, gorgeous in their colour and variety for which she became known across Europe.

Some other prominent women artists whose reputations have endured are Maria von Oosterwijk of Delft, the daughter of a preacher who also painted flowers; Clara Peeters, a painter of still life, and Anna von Schurman. Most of these women specialized in particular genres, as did many male artists, catering to the open art market, seeking a niche for their wares. It would be interesting to examine the visual qualities and subject matter of the works by women in an analysis of the differences they exhibit when compared to works by men. As mentioned earlier, Pollock has demonstrated that for Impressionist painting in Paris, issues of class and gender are constructed in and by the making of visual art; her analytical method could be useful in the study of seventeenth century Dutch art.

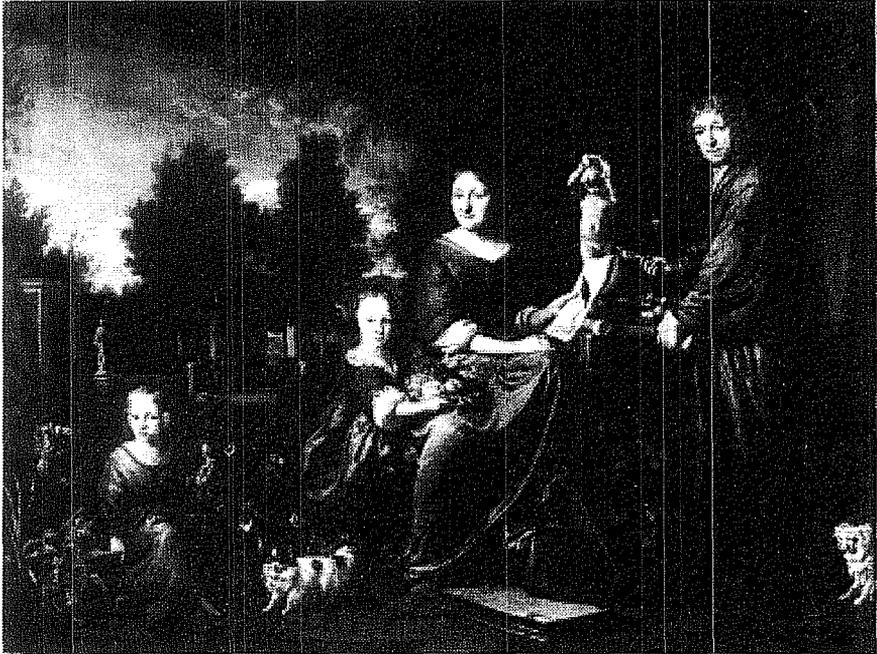


Fig. 5 Jan Weenix, *Family of Agnes Block (1629–1704) and Sybrand de Flines (1623–97)*, oil on canvas, after 1674, Amsterdam Historical Museum, Amsterdam. (Photo: courtesy Amsterdams Historisch Museum)

The Haarlem artist Judith Leyster is one extraordinary example of a woman artist who was unusual both in her humble origins and her successful career. She painted portraits and genre subjects, and joined a guild, following the pattern of a man's career until her marriage to a painter, Jan Miense Molenaer.⁴⁷ It is probable that she continued as her husband's assistant. Due to her formidable technique and liveliness—and her gender—her works were later confused with those of Hals. Her signature was replaced with his by unscrupulous dealers in order to increase the value of the works, suggesting that the dealers must have realized that these paintings were equal to those of Hals. Recent scholarship and cleaning of the paintings is restoring Leyster's rightful reputation.

While no names of Mennonite women painters have emerged, they are likely to have worked alongside their Mennonite artist husbands without ever signing their work. Nevertheless, one amateur painter was a very remarkable Mennonite woman. Agnes Block (1629–1704) was a member of the Waterland church, a famed botanist consulted by academics, a patron of art, an art collector, and a friend of the poet Vondel. She also managed her own financial affairs, even writing a will.⁴⁸ Agnes Block commissioned illustrations of her botanical specimens, the insects and birds she studied, from artists including the well-known woman painter Maria Sibylla Merian. Block painted as an amateur and modelled in clay. She was also skilled in “knipkunst” or the art of paper cutting.

A portrait by Jan Weenix of the *Family of Agnes Block and Sybrand de Flines*, painted after 1674, places Block in the centre of the picture, but as she is seated, her husband stands taller and he is framed by a doorway.⁴⁹ (Fig. 5) Two children, a niece and a nephew, sit by her; her garden extends in the background to her right. She holds a painting of a bird, a framed painting is propped up at her feet, and a statuette sits on the table beside her; all her talents are on display. Although the framework for Block's representation in this portrait is constrained by conventional definitions of femininity, she did achieve fame and fortune for her intellectual and artistic achievements.

Finally, there is one Mennonite woman, Joanna Koerten (1650–1715), who became internationally sought after and celebrated for her art of papercutting.⁵⁰ Like many women artists of her class and generation Koerten was trained in embroidery and other needlework techniques, in glasscutting, modelling and music. A member of the Amsterdam Lamist Mennonite congregation, Koerten did not marry until 1691. Her portrait was engraved by Pieter Schenk after David van der Plaes in 1701.⁵¹ Her reputation was such that she received four thousand guilders from the German Empress for a papercut of a flower arrangement. Koerten produced a large number of papercut works, including religious subjects and numerous portraits of important figures such as Frederick III van Brandenburg and the stadtholder William III, King of Great Britain and Ireland.⁵² The technique she employs resembles needlework techniques, such as “drawn thread” and “cut work,” in which the design is created by a series of empty spaces. Papercutting in Europe was most likely imported by traders in the sixteenth century from China where papercutting had a very long tradition. There is also evidence of a bark-cutting practice among aboriginal Mexicans at the time of colonial contact (reminiscent of the birchbark biting performed in Manitoba and Saskatchewan by First Nations people). By the sixteenth century, papercut greetings cards, heraldic devices and narrative images were popular in northern Europe. By the eighteenth century papercut and “fractur” (Gothic script) valentines were being hand-made in North America in Dutch and German communities.⁵³ Like the traditional needle-arts of the Mennonites, the paper cutting tradition has survived in the Mennonite diaspora as well; in Mexico, Pennsylvania Dutch country and Canada.⁵⁴

The tools for paper cutting are sharp little knives and tiny scissors (once more the shears are in hand, cutting out evil). The forms are not silhouettes but negative images, that is, the outlines of the forms are cut out and the sheet of paper is placed on a dark background to set off the image. The visual qualities of the medium and the artistic process involved in producing them reveal a level of virtuosity that reaches far beyond the supposed virtues of humility and obedience that were prescribed by the books of domestic conduct and the expectations of the culture. Undeniably, the creation of objects of beauty brings aesthetic pleasure and personal satisfaction, even prestige among one's peers.

Koerten's skill is quite extraordinary: her papercut of a *Virgin and Child*, executed in 1703, measures only seventy millimetres in height, yet even when

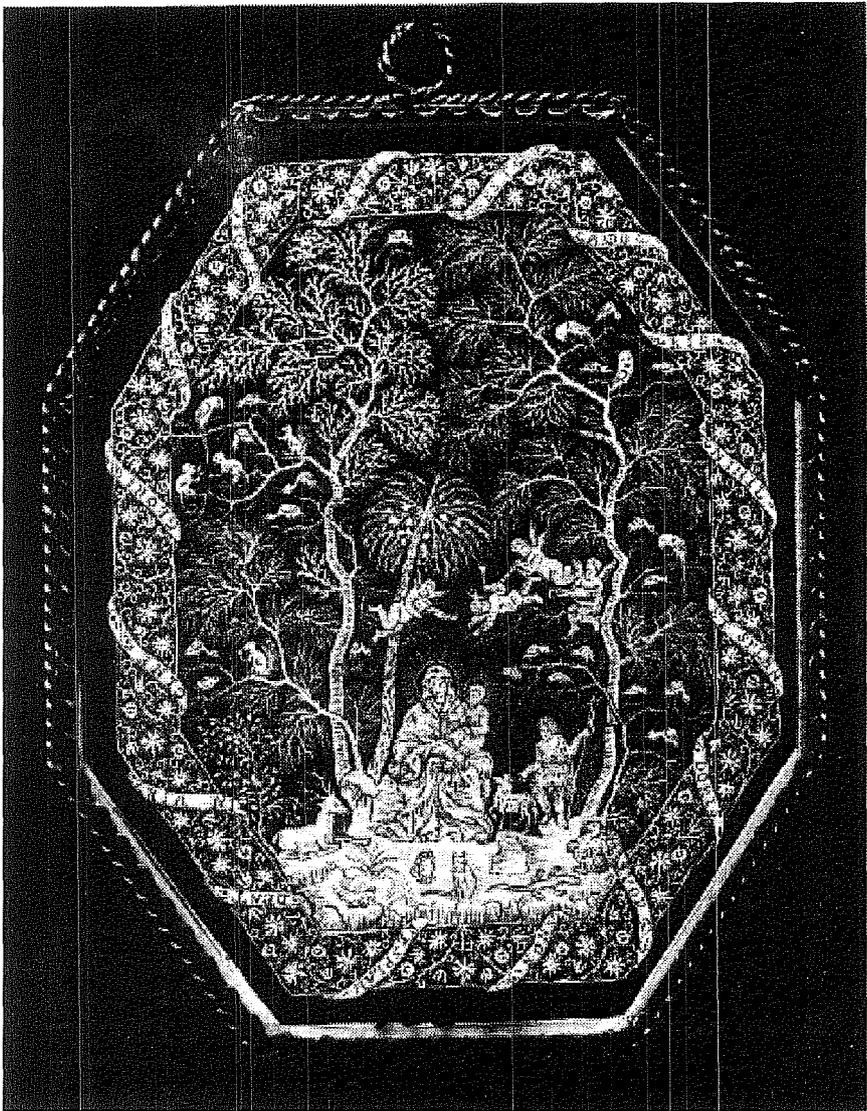


Fig. 6 Joanna Koerten, *Virgin and Child*, papercut, height c.70 mm, 1703, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, London. (Photo: courtesy V&A Picture Library)

magnified a hundred times its size, the detail, precision and intricacy involved is astonishing.⁵⁵ (Fig. 6)

Joanna Koerten's fame grew so great that her husband opened their home as a living museum and created a lucrative tourist attraction. Joanna Koerten collected the responses to her work that came in the form of verses, engravings, watercolours and drawings from her admirers, including most of the well-known writers and artists of the period, in an album or "Register"—her

Stamboek.⁵⁶ Even after her death it remained fashionable to visit the collection and make an entry in the *Stamboek*.

The definitions of “woman,” “art” and “woman artist” are inscribed on the medium of papercutting and its social value. At a time when the Dutch were losing their cultural and financial dominance to the autocracy of Louis XIV’s French court and the taste for the rococo, the papercut was a desirable commodity and highly prized by the ruling class for its virtuosity, decorative qualities and fragility. As objects of “chinoiserie” papercuts were a testament to colonial power and were fashionably exotic. The professional woman artist making papercuts is complicit in the construction of femininity that the papercut represents as well as social aspirations to the upper class, wealth and power. While famous Dutch artists such as Bartolomeus van der Helst were going bankrupt during an anxious period of wars of succession and territorial control abroad,⁵⁷ Koerten and others served foreign patrons and catered to imperial taste. It is significant that Koerten was celebrated in her own time—her art demonstrated Dutch values of skill, technical knowledge and religious devotion as well as the qualities that were associated with the “feminine.” Her place of work was her home and it became a living museum; her fame rested in part, and reinforced, the qualities of delicacy, precision, patience and concentration that defined good wives, mothers and daughters.

Notes

I would like to thank Virginia Nixon for her careful reading and helpful comments in the preparation of this paper.

¹ Piet Visser, Mary S. Sprunger and Adriaan Plak, *Menno Simons: Places, Portraits and Progeny*, trans. Gary K. White (Altona, Manitoba: Friesens, 1996).

² C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht, eds. *Profiles of Anabaptist Women* (Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1996).

³ Joan Kelly-Gadol, “Did Women have a Renaissance?” *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, eds. Renate Bridenthal, Claudia Koonz and Susan Stuard (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 175–201; Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis.” *American Historical Review* 91.5 (December 1986), 1053–1075; Merry E. Wiesner, “Spinning Out Capital: Women’s Work in the Early Modern Economy,” Bridenthal, op. cit., 221–249; Merry E. Wiesner, “Spinsters and Seamstresses: Women in Cloth and Clothing Production,” *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 191–205; Thera Wijsenbeck-Olthuis and Leo Moordegraaf, “Painting for a Living: The Economic Context of Judith Leyster’s Career,” in James A. Welu and Pieter Biesboer, *Judith Leyster: A Dutch Master and Her World* (Worcester Art Museum, Frans Halsmuseum, Haarlem, Exhibition Catalogue, Yale University Press, 1993)39–54.

⁴ Janet Wolff, *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).

⁵ Charlotte Bunch, "Not by Degrees: Feminist Theory and Education," *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly* 5.1 (Summer 1979), 240–253; Sandra Harding, *Feminism and Methodology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

⁶ There is a wide field of literature on genre painting. Three works that have been particularly useful to me for this paper are Wayne E. Franits' *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (Cambridge/New York/Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Simon Schama's *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (London: Collins, 1987); and David Smith's "Irony and Civility: Notes on the Convergence of Genre and Portraiture in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting," *The Art Bulletin* 69.3 (1987), 407–430.

⁷ Of particular interest for the seventeenth century in the Netherlands are Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin's *Women Artists: 1550–1950* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989); and Welu and Biesboer's *Judith Leyster: A Dutch Master and Her World*, with excellent essays on the artistic and economic conditions of the period by a number of contributing scholars.

⁸ Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988); Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the making of the feminine* (New York: Routledge, 1989); Rozsika Parker, and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981); Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988); Griselda Pollock, "Theory, Ideology, Politics: Art and its Myths," *The Art Bulletin* 78 (March 1996), 16–22.

⁹ Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the spaces of femininity," *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 54.

¹⁰ Pollock, "Modernity and the spaces of femininity," 55.

¹¹ *Baptismal Scene*, engraving from L. Hortensius' *Van den Oproer der Weder-Dooperen*, Enkhuizen, 1624, Mennonite Library, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Amsterdam. (Illustrated in Visser, 19: 3c.)

¹² Jan Luyken, *Female Anabaptist Martyrs*, engraving from T. J. van Braght, *Het Bloedigh Tooneel, of Martelaers Spiegel der Doops-gesinde of Weereloose Christensen*, Amsterdam, 1685, Mennonite Library, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Amsterdam. (Illustrated in Visser, 37: 12f.)

¹³ Jan Luyken, *Anabaptist Martyrs*, engraving from T. J. van Braght, *Het Bloedigh Tooneel, of Martelaers Spiegel der Doops-gesinde of Weereloose Christensen*, Amsterdam, 1685, Mennonite Library, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Amsterdam. (Illustrated in Visser, 37: 12c.) (Note the gendered difference in the titles of the two scenes: *Female Anabaptist Martyrs* and *Anabaptist Martyrs*.)

¹⁴ Pieter Jacobsz van Laer, Illustration for Jan Starter's *Mennonite Courtship* (1623), washed pen drawing, 1640, Atlas van Stolk Foundation, Rotterdam. (Illustrated in Visser, 120: 19c.)

¹⁵ Anonymous, *Kitchen of Religious Disputes*, engraving, printed by Willem Jansz Wijngaerts, Amsterdam, 1625–32, Atlas van Stolk Foundation, Rotterdam. (Illustrated in Visser, 114: 10.)

¹⁶ David Joris, *The Bride of God*, engraving from his *Wonderboek*, c. 1582, Mennonite Library, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Amsterdam. (Illustrated in Visser, 39: 13b.)

¹⁷ See for instance, Gil Saunders' *The Nude: A New Perspective* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989) and Chapter 4 ("Painted Ladies") in Parker and Pollock, 114–133.

¹⁸ Frans Hals, *Feyna van Steenkiste* (1603/04–40), pendant to the portrait of her husband Lucas de Clercq (c. 1593–1652), oil on canvas, c. 1635, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. (Illustrated in Visser, 144: 69b.)

¹⁹ A. S. and W. A. de Clercq, *Familie-boek De Clercq* (Haarlem, 1992), 4, VIb cited in Visser, 144.

²⁰ Cynthia Kortenhorst-von Bogendorf Rupprath, "Catalogue" in Welu and Biesboer, 207.

²¹ Frans Hals, *Portrait of a Seated Woman*, oil on canvas, 1633, National Gallery of Art, Andrew Mellon Collection, Washington, D.C. (Illustrated in Seymour Slive, *Frans Hals* [Munich: Prestel,

1989], 263.)

²² Frans Hals, *Couple in a Garden (Isaac Abrahamsz Massa and Beatrix van der Laan?)*, oil on canvas, 1622, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. (Illustrated in Slive, 163.)

²³ Peter Paul Rubens, *Self-Portrait with his Wife Isabella Brandt in a Honeysuckle Arbour*, oil on canvas, c. 1609, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. (Illustrated in Jennifer Fletcher, *Peter Paul Rubens* [London/New York: Phaidon, 1968], Plate 5.)

²⁴ Visser, 139.

²⁵ Jan de Bray, *Abraham Vincentsz Casteleyn (c.1628-81) and Margaretha van Bancken (?-1693)*, oil on canvas, 1663, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. (Illustrated in Visser, 148:73.)

²⁶ P.C. Molhuysen and P.J. Blok, eds. *Nieuw Nederlandsch Biografisch Woordenboek*, (Leiden, 1911-37), IX, 132-34 and E. de Jongh, *Portretten van echt en trouw. Huwelijk en gezin in de Nederlandse kunst van de zeventiende eeuw* (Zwolle and Haarlem, 1986), 181-83, both cited in Visser, 148.

²⁷ Rembrandt, *Cornelis Claesz Anslo (1592-1646) and Aeltje Gerrits Schouten (1598-1657)*, oil on canvas, 1641, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.

²⁸ Visser, 123.

²⁹ C. Brown et al., eds., *Rembrandt: De Meester & zijn Werkplaats-schilderijen* (Amsterdam and Zwolle, 1991), 222 and G. Schwartz, *Rembrandt zijn leven, zijn schilderijen. Een nieuwe biografie met alle beschikbare schilderijen in kleur afgebeeld* (Alphen aan de Rijn, 1984), 217-19, both cited in Visser, 147.

³⁰ Egbert van Heemskerck, *Family of Jacob Fransz Hercules (c.1635-1708) and Anna Jans ter Burgh (c.1634-1707)*, oil on canvas, 1669, Amsterdam Historical Museum, Amsterdam. (Illustrated in Visser, 151:77.)

³¹ A. Blankert, *Amsterdams Historisch Museum: schilderijen daterend van voor 1800, voorlopige catalogus* (Amsterdam, 1975-79) and Jongh, 257-58, both cited in Visser, 151.

³² Wayne E. Franits, *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Art*, (Cambridge University Press, 1993), 221, n.102.

³³ *Maeghde-Wappen*, engraving, frontispiece from the 1655 edition of Jacob Cats' *Houwelijk: Dat is de gansche gelegenheit des echten staets*, Middleburg, 1625, Amsterdam University Library, Amsterdam. (Illustrated in Franits, Figure 7.)

³⁴ Diego de Saavedra Fajardo (1584/Algezares-1648/Madrid), *Detrahit et Decorat*. (No. 14) from *Idea de un Principe Politico Christiano, representada en cien empresas*. Amsterdam, 1659. (Illustrated in Arthur Henckel and Albrecht Schöne, *Emblemata: Handbuch zur sinnbildkunst des XVI. und XVII. Jahrhunderts*, (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche, 1976), 1329-30. I would like to thank Linwood DeLong and Darlene Abreu-Ferreira for their help with the translation of extracts from the expository text as cited in Henckel and Schöne, 1330: "Los defectos del telar corrige la tigura (cuerpo de esta empresa) y deja con mayor lustre, y hermosa al paño. ...No tiene el vicio mayor enemigo, que la censura. No obra tanto la exortacion, o la doctrina, como esta; porque aquella propone para despues la fama y la gloria: esta acusa lo torpe, y castiga luego divulgando la infamia. La vna es para lo que se à obrar bien: la otra para lo que se à obrado mal, y mas facilmente se retira al animo de lo ignominioso, que acomete lo arduo, y honesto..."

³⁵ Adriaen van de Venne, *Moeder*, engraving from Jacob Cats' *Houwelyck*, The Hague, 1632, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Amsterdam. (Illustrated in Franits, Figure 108.)

³⁶ Visser, 150:76 and 152:78 respectively.

³⁷ Geertruid Rohgman, *Two Women Sewing, A Young Woman Ruffling, A Woman Cooking, A Woman Spinning, A Woman Cleaning*, engravings before 1650, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. (Illustrated in Els Kloek, "The Case of Judith Leyster: Exception or Paradigm?" in Welu and Biesboer, 55-68, Fig. 21.)

38. Wijsenbeek-Olthuis and Noordgraaf, 49.

³⁹ Quirijn van Brekelenkam, *Interior of a Tailor's Shop*, oil on canvas, 1653, Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Mass. (Illustrated in Peter Sutton, *Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting* [Exhibition catalogue, Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1984], Plate 61.)

⁴⁰ See Helen Knibb, "'Present but Not Visible': Searching for Women's History in Museum Collections," *Gender and History* 6, 3 (November, 1994), 352–369; and Sharon Reilly, "Material History and the History of Women," in Mary Kinnear, *First days, Fighting Days* (Canadian Plains Research Center, University of Regina, 1987), 1–17.

⁴¹ Mary Snyder, *Embroidered Show Towel*, 130 x 50 cm, 1852, Waterloo County, Ontario. (Illustrated in Michael Bird, *Canadian Folk Art* [Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1983], 57.)

⁴² Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" in Nochlin, *Women Art and Power*, 145–178.

⁴³ Visser, 132–136.

⁴⁴ H. Miedema, ed., Karel van Mander. *The Lives of the Illustrious Netherlandish and German Painters*, vol. II (Doornspijk, 1995), 11–168, cited in Visser.

⁴⁵ Govert Flinck, *Self-Portrait in Fancy Clothing*, oil on panel, 1639, National Gallery, London. (Illustrated in Visser, 134:53.)

⁴⁶ Klock, 62-65; 68, n.42.

⁴⁷ See Welu and Biesboer, *passim* and especially Frima Fox Hofrichter, "Judith Leyster's Proposition—Between Virtue and Vice," *The Feminist Art Journal* 4 (1975), 22–26 (Reprinted in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany* [New York: 1982], 173–82.)

⁴⁸ C. van de Graft, *Agnes Blok, Vondels nicht en vrienden* (Utrecht, 1943), Jongh, 265–67; M.S. Sprunger, *Rich Mennonites, Poor Mennonites: Economics and Theology in the Amsterdam Waterlander Congregation during the Golden Age* (Urbana, Ill. Dissertation, 1993), 109 and 121–22; and Blankert, 499, all cited in Visser, 153.

⁴⁹ Jan Weenix, *Family of Agnes Blok (1629-1704) and Sybrand de Flines (1623-97)*, oil on canvas, after 1674, Amsterdam Historical Museum, Amsterdam. (Illustrated in Visser, 153: 79.)

⁵⁰ Molhuysen and Blok, X, 478–481; M. Plomp, "De portretten van het Stamboek van Joanna Koerten (1650–1715)." *Leids Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 8 (1988), 323–344; Hollstein 708¹, all cited in Visser, 136.

⁵¹ Pieter Schenk after David van der Plaes, *Joanna Koerten*, mezzotint, 1701, Nederlands Openluchtmuseum, Arnhem. (Illustrated in Visser, 136:59a.)

⁵² Joanna Koerten, *Frederick III van Brandenburg*, papercut, 30 x 24 cm, Familie-stitching De Flines, Wassenaar, (Illustrated in Plomp, fig.2) and *Wilhelmus Britanniarum Rex*, paper cutting on black background, c.1700, Municipal Museum De Lakenhal, Leyden, (Illustrated in Visser, 136:59b).

⁵³ See "Papercut," *The Dictionary of Art* 24, Jane Turner, ed. (London: Macmillan, 1996), 56–57. For the technique of Chinese paper cut-outs and their history in China see J. Hejzlar, *Chinese Paper Cut-outs* (London: Spring Books, 1960).

⁵⁴ In Ontario in the nineteenth century a man could try his hand at this intricate craft. A *Paper Cut-out* by Abraham Meyer of Lincoln County, Ontario of 1824 (39 x 32 cm) is illustrated in Michael Bird, *Canadian Folk Art* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1983), 15.

⁵⁵ Joanna Koerten, *Virgin and Child*, papercut, height c.70 mm, 1703, London, Victoria and Albert Museum. (Illustrated in "Papercut," *The Dictionary of Art* : 56.)

⁵⁶ M. Plomp, 326–28 and *passim*.

⁵⁷ Emile Meijer, *Treasures from the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam*, trans. Annette Mills (Scala/ Philip Wilson, 1985), 107.