

Hanneke Grootenboer. *The Rhetoric of Perspective: Realism and Illusionism in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Still-Life Painting*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005. xiv + 208 pp. + 24 color plates + 13 half-tone illus. \$35.00. Review by THOMAS DACOSTA KAUFMANN, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY.

Is still life the most philosophical genre of painting? So some art historians have opined, and still-life painting has engaged many philosophers. *The Rhetoric of Perspective* begins by invoking Martin Heidegger's ruminations, deploys arguments taken from Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Derrida, and relies on the theories of Roland Barthes, Paul de Man, Jacques Lacan, and Walter Benjamin, among others, to argue that Dutch seventeenth-century still life presents philosophical reflections on vision. Hanneke Grootenboer analyzes paintings by Pieter Claesz., Willem Claesz. Heda, Cornelius Norbertus Gijsbrechts, and Samuel van Hoogstraten in order to claim that perspective in Dutch seventeenth-century still-life painting "points to a truth in painting that falls beyond the picture's frame, perhaps even beyond our perception" (18). Still life raises "issues concerning the nature of its own representation" that are said to call for "a different way of looking" that (also recalling Heidegger) is literally thought-provoking.

In treating still life, Grootenboer acknowledges inspiration from Svetlana Alpers, Mieke Bal, and Norman Bryson in expressing dissatisfaction with interpretative methods that search for meaning. Her sympathies are instead more with French art historians who have been informed by post-structuralism. In contrast, contemporary debates in art history over realism and description in Dutch seventeenth-century still-life painting are treated with greater dispatch.

The introduction summarizes how Grootenboer will deal with seventeenth-century trompe l'oeil painting, defined as pictures in which the distinction between reality and representation is beyond our perception, and with the so-called Dutch breakfast still life, paintings displaying foods on a table. The two represent "truth in painting" but are said to differ, in that the former stands for illusionism, the latter for realism. Her approach is informed by Merleau-Ponty's conception of the reversibility of perception, Hubert Damisch's notion of the "thought of painting," and Barthes's and De Man's ideas about the rhetoric of images (and reading). This leads to reading paint-

ing as “a philosophical treatise whose rhetoric is perspective” (13), understood in terms suggested by Walter Benjamin as a form of allegory.

The first chapter dissects still-life paintings by Pieter Claesz. to demonstrate “The Invisibility of Depth.” While acknowledging the importance of previous readings which have been informed by historical research, Grootenboer argues that they cannot do justice to such works, because they leave a residue of pictorial elements which call for a fundamentally different mode of looking than that designed for other genres. In a discussion ranging from Schopenhauer to Diderot to E. H. Gombrich, she attempts to found this mode of looking on an understanding of the discrepancy between perception and vision based on Merleau-Ponty and Lacan: perspectival notions of vision, on which painting depends, supposedly collapse. Whereas realism seen in Dutch breakfast pieces like those by Claesz. developed in line with Albertian perspective, *trompe l’oeil* has pursued a different direction by eliminating any suggestion of pictorial depth. Cornelius Gisbrechts’s *trompe l’oeil* representation of the reverse side of a picture thus reaches the ultimate limit of painting, revealing itself as anti-painting.

The second chapter, “Truth in Breakfast Painting,” takes off from a breakfast still life by Willem Heda to discuss the role of empty backgrounds. Though Grootenboer offers good descriptions of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Flemish and Dutch paintings, her argument is grounded on a distinction between *horror vacui* and the void made by Blaise Pascal. These are exemplified by the contrast between Heda’s work and a banquet piece by Jan Davidz.de Heem, the one possessing a void, the other’s rich display resulting from *horror vacui*. Hence breakfast still lifes supposedly stand out as unique phenomena in which the void takes over and rules pictorial design as a form of “structured emptiness” which reveals the rhetorical structure of perspective.

The third chapter, “The Rhetoric of Perspective,” presents a critique of what Grootenboer deems the two most important twentieth-century treatments of perspective, Panofsky’s theory of perspective as symbolic form, and Damisch’s account of the *Origins of Perspective*. Although it is discussed by neither of them, anamorphosis, a form of projection which depends on perspective which relies on the margins of the visual field, is said to provide a corrective to their views by offering an alternative to orthodox perspective. Lacan’s discussion of anamorphosis and his notion of the gaze inspire

Grootenboer to suggest that Gisbrechts's *trompe l'oeil*'s allow us to "see" the operation of perspective, hence its rhetorical aspect.

The last chapter, "Perspective as Allegorical Form," applies Benjamin's notion of allegory to *vanitas* still-life paintings, pictures with a skull or other objects suggesting the vanity of life. Grootenboer argues that perspective's structure is similar to that of allegory, and that Gisbrechts's "self-aware image" indicates perspective is deployed as allegory when it employs two perspectival systems in the same image. Following Benjamin, Grootenboer turns Panofsky's notion of perspective as symbolic form into a conception of perspective as allegorical form; she asserts that through it painting represents truth. Finally, Grootenboer criticizes "traditional" Anglo-Saxon (and especially Dutch) art historical methods and interpretations as shaped by a model of thought based on orthodox perspective and determined by an (out-moded) symbolic instead of allegorical mode.

A brief conclusion presents favorably but takes issue with Alpers's argument in *Art of Describing*, Paul Claudel, and Barthes's interpretation of how still life represents the dissection of objects. Grootenboer proposes that still life points to another sort of gaze than the scientific one that answers our gaze. Painting offers its own perspective in picturing us looking.

Like many another post-structural *olla podrida*, Grootenboer's text tries to insulate itself against critique. Grootenboer eschews historical method in art history as seeking to find the conditions under which a work of art "came into being, the conditions, the contemporary meaning it is supposed to contain, the underlying motivation for its creation, and/or the historical context of which it is a result," since these supposedly express "a longing to return to the time when the artwork was produced, as if its original context would provide the background into which the artwork would perfectly fit" (164). She also argues that "clinging to coherence is itself an allegory of the fact that historical truth cannot be found where we have been looking for it" (165).

Serious questions may still be raised. While Grootenboer rails against the historical method, she is not hesitant to avail herself of secondary literature, including notably Alpers on Dutch painting, and Michael Holly on historiography. That such views are in particular debatable at best should have given pause before they were used to supply the bases for arguments which claim to have some kind of historical purchase. In general, greater awareness of art historical literature, especially but not only in the Germanophone tradition

(other than Heidegger as filtered through French and subsequently Anglo-Saxon writers) would have undermined Grootenboer's claims not only about history writing but also more specifically on her arguments about trompe l'oeil. Many art historians in recent years have been informed by reception aesthetics and hermeneutics, which hardly seek to understand artworks solely in their original contexts. For example, Wolfgang Kemp has treated Rembrandt's painting of the *Holy Family* in which a prominent trompe l'oeil curtain and frame appear. This picture serves as just one reminder that trompe l'oeil is not reserved to still life but plays a role in many genres: flies, frames, and curtains appear in portraits, "genre," and "history" painting (including as with the Rembrandt of religious subjects), not to mention pictures of saints. Like trompe l'oeil in still lifes, its appearance in these genres provokes thought, yet obviously requires different readings than those offered by Grootenboer: it is unlikely, for instance, that a trompe l'oeil seventeenth-century *Holy Family* suggests the nothingness of being.

Many differing accounts have also been offered for the role of depth in painting that do not correspond to Grootenboer's view of a standard story of perspective. Otto Pächt has, for instance, argued that the representation of space was only one of the formative principles involved in the organization of the picture surface, and that the suggestion of depth was not its sole or main goal; Pächt long ago criticized Panofsky's views of perspective and hidden symbolism (and in English). Although Grootenboer makes much of James Elkins's tracings showing where perspective has not been accurately employed, in *The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space* (first published in 1957), which treats Lorenzetti (also discussed by Grootenboer) and the origins of artificial perspective in painting, John White already demonstrated that painters may deliberately choose not to employ it "correctly." Anamorphosis has also hardly been neglected even by art historians of a post-structuralist disposition (Lyle Massey).

Still-life painting does indeed present paradoxes, is allegorical, and may be philosophical, but not in the ways that Grootenboer finds either in Pascal, nor, more importantly, through post-modern discourse. Paradoxes were very much a part of the culture of early modern Europe, as an extensive secondary literature on them, ignored by Grootenboer, has demonstrated. Paradox may be related to the often symbolic as well as allegorical uses of trompe l'oeil and still life (as exemplified by Arcimboldo's reversible heads, and Georg

Hoefnagel's emblematic images). In his landmark book on still life Charles Sterling already evoked Epicureanism, and works such as Georg Hoefnagel's and Arcimboldo's variations on still life may now be shown to have had philosophical underpinnings in contemporary Neostoicism and Erasmianism. Four decades before the book under review, in *Paradoxia Epidemica* Rosalie Colie already pointed out how still life invited the beholder to "see through" the subject of the painting, to the ontological truth residing beyond the painted objects, beyond the painting itself" (274) and also explicitly noted the self-reflective, thought-provoking aspects of the genre. However, where post-Heideggerian arguments may discover merely the provocation of thought or nothingness, Colie found the paradox resolved in copiousness and plentitude.

Nanette Salomon. *Shifting Priorities: Gender and Genre in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004. 163 pp. + 98 illus. \$65.00. Review by ELLEN KONOWITZ, STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT NEW PALTZ.

Beginning in the 1980s, Nanette Salomon has been a major figure in the study of Dutch seventeenth-century genre painting. This book, a collection of both previously published and unpublished but newly revised essays written by Salomon between 1983 and 1998, not only assembles some of her most interesting work in a single volume but also illustrates the evolution of some aspects of the field of Dutch art history by juxtaposing studies that reveal the author's own "shifting priorities." As Salomon discusses in her introductory essay, during the two decades spanned in this book, her work first participated in and then moved away from the traditional art-historical method of iconographic study that long dominated the field. This is the approach that was used since the 1950s by Erwin Panofsky and his students, who interpreted realistically portrayed everyday objects in fifteenth-century Northern religious art as "disguised symbols" to explain an image as a whole and was continued, explains Salomon, by scholars such as Eddy de Jongh in the 1970s and 1980s, who analyzed in a similar way what was called "*schijnrealism*" ("apparent realism") in seventeenth-century Dutch art of secular subjects. Salomon credits in particular the work of Mieke Bal and Griselda Pollock for