VISUAL AND MATERIAL CULTURE, 1300-1700

Angela K. Ho

Creating Distinctions in Dutch Genre Painting

Repetition and Invention

Amsterdam University Press

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The publication was published with support from the Historians of Netherlandish Art and the Department of History and Art History at George Mason University.

Cover illustration: Gerard ter Borch, *The Suitor's Visit*, c. 1658. Oil on canvas, 80 × 75 cm. National Gallery of Art, Andrew W. Mellon Collection, Washington, DC.

Cover design: Coördesign, Leiden
Lay-out: Newgen/Konvertus

Amsterdam University Press English-language titles are distributed in the US and Canada by the University of Chicago Press.

ISBN 978 94 6298 297 0
e-ISBN 978 90 4853294 0
DOI 10.5117/9789462982970
NUR 654

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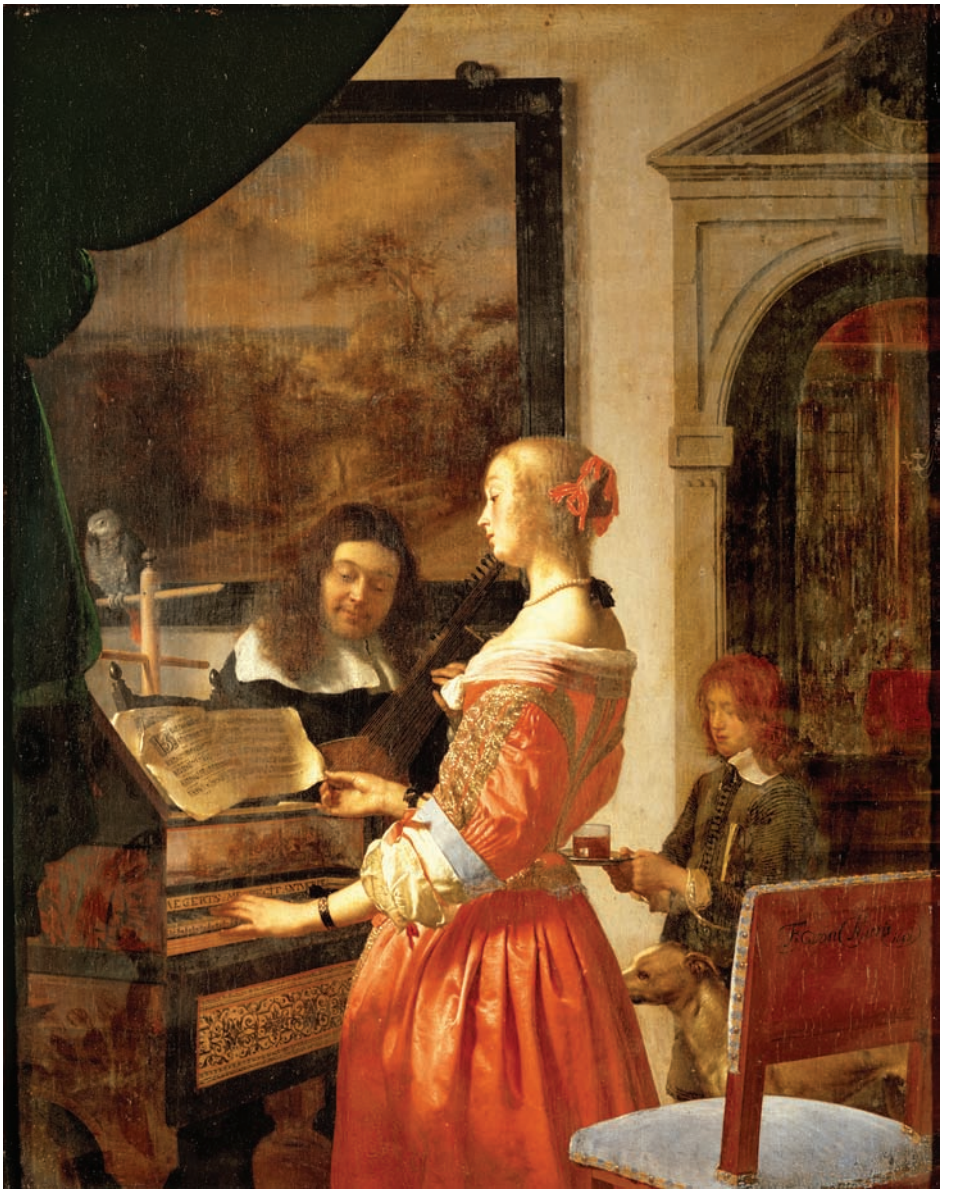

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Acknowledgments

I have benefited from the generosity of many individuals and organizations over years of research and writing for this project. I would like to begin by acknowledging the institutions that offered financial assistance during this long process. The dissertation stage was funded by a Rackham Merit Fellowship from the University of Michigan and the Robert H. and Clarice Smith Fellowship from the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. At George Mason University, the Study Leave for Tenure-Track Faculty program and the Mathy Junior Faculty Award in the Arts and Humanities provided two semesters of much needed research leave for developing the dissertation into this book. Summer Research Funding for Tenure-Track Faculty and an Alan and Gwen Nelson Travel Grant enabled me to conduct additional research in Dutch archives and libraries. A Historians of Netherlandish Art Fellowship provided financial support for the production of this book. I would also like to thank the Department of History and Art History at George Mason for granting me funds to defray the costs of obtaining images and copyright licenses.

I would like to thank the curators of the many museums in Europe and the US who made it possible for me to study the paintings in their collections and consult their curatorial files. In particular, I thank Arthur Wheelock, Marjorie Wieseman, and the late Walter Liedtke for sharing their insights during my visits to their museums in the early phases of my research, and Dominique Surh at the Leiden Gallery for her help in the final stages of the project. I would like to express my appreciation to the librarians and staffs of the following institutions: the RKD Nederlands Instituut voor Kunstgeschiedenis, the Koninklijke Bibliotheek, the Rijksmuseum Library, the Stadsarchief Amsterdam, the Special Collections at the University of Amsterdam Library, the University of Michigan Fine Arts Library, and the Fenwick Library at George Mason University.

I am grateful to the scholars in the US and the Netherlands who shared their knowledge on various aspects of my project. I thank Eric Jan Sluijter, Marten Jan Bok, and Elmer Kolfin for the opportunity to participate in the graduate discussion group in Amsterdam in the early stages of my project. For their encouragement and interest in my work, I would like to thank Kevin Carr, Wayne Franits, Elaine Gazda, Dorothy Metzger Habel, Alison Kettering, Diane Owen Hughes, Helmut Puff, Lisa Rosenthal, and Elizabeth Sears. For their friendship and support, I thank Heather Badamo, Heidi Gearhart, Katie Hornstein, Monica Huerta, Timothy McCall, Sean Roberts, Olivia Poska, and Noël Schiller.

Several individuals helped me negotiate the intense final stages of preparing the book manuscript for publication. Special thanks are due to Diana Bullen Presciutti, Kirsten Olds, and Heather Vinson for poring over much of the text and offering imaginative suggestions and practical advice, as well as years of friendship. My colleagues at the History and Art History Department at George Mason University have

been a great source of support and inspiration. In particular, I am grateful to Robert DeCaroli, Michele Greet, and Ellen Todd for reading and commenting on various chapters of the manuscript, and to Lawrence Butler, Sheila ffolliott, Carol Mattusch, Paula Petrik, Brian Platt, and Jennifer van Horn for their advice on the publication process. I would also like to thank Erika Gaffney at Amsterdam University Press for her support and guidance, and the anonymous reader for the many helpful suggestions on improving the manuscript.

I am fortunate to have had generous mentors over the years. I thank Zirka Filipczak, who first sparked my interest in early modern Netherlandish art, and Megan Holmes and Pat Simons, who challenged me to question my assumptions and step out of my comfort zone. I am especially grateful to Celeste Brusati, my dissertation advisor, who encouraged me to develop a project that somehow fused my interests in art making and economic theory.

Finally, I want to thank my family. I am grateful to my parents for understanding and supporting my decision to pursue an academic career far from home, and to my sister, my brother-in-law, and my big extended family for cheering me on. This book is dedicated to the memory of my aunt, Betty Ho, an inspiring scholar and teacher.

Introduction

When the art collection of Adriaan Bout, agent of the Elector Palatine Johann Wilhelm, was auctioned in 1733, the painting that fetched the highest price was *The Duet* (Plate 1; 1658) by Frans van Mieris the Elder. At 3,000 guilders, it was almost seven times the price of Rembrandt's *Song of Simeon*, which had once belonged to Stadhouder Frederik Hendrik.[1] *The Duet*, completed early in Van Mieris's career, already shows the qualities that would make him one of the most famous Dutch painters of his age. With his characteristically polished manner of painting, Van Mieris puts his stamp on a pictorial type—music making by elegant figures in a refined domestic space—that today has become almost synonymous with Dutch genre painting from the second half of the seventeenth century. Working within a familiar pictorial idiom, Van Mieris nevertheless asserts his personal artistic identity through a stylized elegance and vivid, lifelike details in this painting. As such, it exemplifies the pictorial phenomenon at the center of this study: the creation of distinctions through purposeful repetition.

With *The Duet*, Van Mieris participated in an exchange among artists who were experimenting in the so-called high-life genre painting in the third quarter of the seventeenth century. In the early 1650s Gerard ter Borch introduced compositions representing encounters between upper-class figures that were distinct in appearance and tone from the merry companies produced in the previous generation. Shortly thereafter artists including Pieter de Hooch, Gabriel Metsu, Jan Steen, and Van Mieris produced adaptations of Ter Borch's novel pictorial type. *The Duet*, for example, bears a resemblance to Ter Borch's paintings in the tone of the scene and the figural types.[2] In this painting, Van Mieris has limited the number of figures and arranged them in a compact pyramid, with the striking young woman at the apex, in the center of the painting. The slight tilt of her head to the right accentuates her long neck and sloping shoulders, her figure forming an elegant S-curve as she leans back from the harpsichord. Music was a common pictorial metaphor for love and harmony, yet here Van Mieris, again in a way similar to Ter Borch in his courtship pictures, offers a restrained interpretation of the amorous theme. None of Van Mieris's figures make eye contact with each other or the viewer, with the music-making couple focusing their gaze on the sheet music, and the young servant giving his full attention to the tray in his hands.

Despite the similarities, Van Mieris accentuates his authorship in this picture by introducing features that distinguish his work from Ter Borch's. Scholars have identified the seated female figure and the young boy serving a drink in Ter Borch's *Concert* (Fig. 1) as models for the corresponding elements in Van Mieris's *Duet*. Ter Borch demonstrates his celebrated ability to render finely clad human figures in this picture. He carefully differentiates the various fabrics—from the woven carpet to the

Fig. 1. Gerard ter Borch, *The Concert*, c. 1657. Oil on panel, 47 × 44 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

shiny satin skirt—and captures the graceful actions and gestures of the young women. The backdrop, which consists of a dark patterned bed curtain, is summarily treated, further focusing the viewer's attention on the brightly illuminated music-making scene in the foreground. By contast, Van Mieris brings almost the entire picture to a high level of finish. He does devote much attention to the figures, painstakingly differentiating the play of light over the delicate hair and bared shoulder of the young woman from the sheen of the orange satin dress and gold embroidery, but he meticulously describes the surrounding objects as well. For example, the curling page of music is given a palpable sense of texture, while the decorations on the harpsichord are rendered with such fastidious care that scholars have been able to connect the

inscribed name to known harpsichord makers in Antwerp.[3] The insistence on capturing the smallest detail recalls the work of Gerrit Dou, Van Mieris's famous teacher in Leiden. Van Mieris imagines light streaming in from an unseen source on the left, a feature that may have been inspired by an exchange with the Delft artists Pieter de Hooch and Carel Fabritius.[4] Another element that recalls Delft paintings is the opening to a secondary space on the right, even though the ascending staircase has not been constructed with the same mathematical accuracy found in the works of De Hooch or Gerrit Houckgeest.

Van Mieris, here at the beginning of his career, was therefore appropriating and fusing thematic and technical elements from various sources in mid-century Dutch genre painting to create his own distinctive treatment of a familiar subject. *The Duet* has in turn been regarded as the inspiration for Jan Steen's *Young Woman Playing a Harpsichord to a Young Man* (c. 1659; Fig. 2) and Vermeer's *Young Woman standing at a Virginal* (c. 1670–72; Fig. 3), both in London. Indeed, a dialogue developed among artists in different locations in the 1650s and 1660s, as ideas in composition, brushwork, and narrative are adopted from, assimilated by, and transformed among painters specializing in refined genre painting. Each artist also creatively redeployed motifs and techniques he himself developed in order to generate innovative compositions. These acts of borrowing and reusing pictorial elements are not just indicative of the conventional nature of Dutch art or mechanical attempts to facilitate production—as they have often been characterized in the art historical literature—but of efforts to create difference through the reworking of stock themes and motifs.

The patterns of collecting reveal that the viewers in the most privileged segment of the Dutch art market were cognizant of the artists' purposeful acts of repetition, and they were moreover interested in creating juxtapositions between diverse interpretations of common themes and motifs in their collections. Inventories and auction catalogues indicate that substantial collections of paintings in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century often featured pictures of similar subjects by different artists. For instance, along with *The Duet*, Bout's collection included works by painters—including the Leiden *fijnschilders* ("fine painters")[5] Dou, Carel de Moor, and Pieter Slingelandt, as well as Ter Borch, Gabriel Metsu, and Caspar Netscher—who were known for their detailed and polished renderings.[6] Bout was not an isolated example; other wealthy art enthusiasts had pictures that were related in theme and technique in their collections. Moreover, contemporary testimonies, including artists' biographies and travelers' journals, suggest that the purchase of a painting in the top layer of the Dutch market was often not simply an isolated, impersonal business transaction, but could involve social interactions between artist and client. A collector could forge a sustained relationship with an artist s/he admired, buying several paintings from him and introducing him to other art lovers. For example, Franciscus de le Boe Sylvius, who assembled an impressive collection

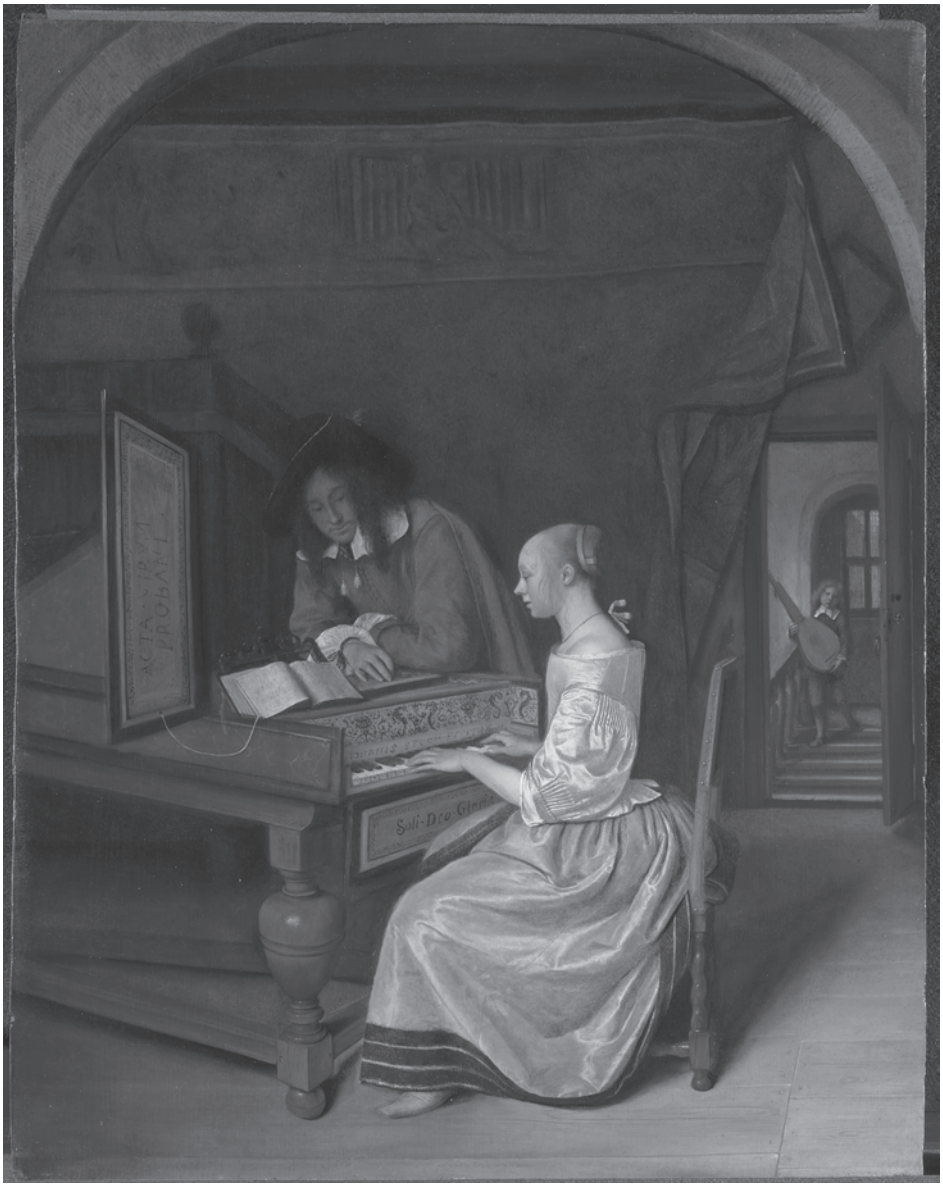

Fig. 2. Jan Steen, *A Young Woman Playing a Harpsichord to a Young Man*, c. 1659. Oil on panel, 42.3 × 33 cm. The National Gallery, London. © National Gallery, London/Art Resource, NY.

that contained eleven works by Dou and six by Van Mieris, was described in contemporary sources as not only a customer but also a supporter of Van Mieris.[7] I therefore propose that artists in this market segment were well aware of viewers' preferences for this sophisticated interplay between familiarity and difference and could develop strategies not just to meet their demand but to shape collectors' preferences.

Fig. 3. Johannes Vermeer, *A Young Woman standing at a Virginal*, c. 1670–72. Oil on canvas, 51.7 × 45.2 cm. The National Gallery, London. © National Gallery, London/Art Resource, NY.

In order to study this interdependence between production and reception in greater specificity, this book focuses on the practices of three genre painters: Dou, Ter Borch, and Van Mieris. Not only were they already famous in their own time,[8] all three have also been seen as innovators in the history of genre painting. The third quarter of the seventeenth century saw the emergence of new stylistic traits and subject matter in Dutch genre painting. Technically, there was a growing preference for polished finishes and astonishing feats of illusionism, an area in which Dou reached new heights. His

meticulous rendering of lifelike details on a miniature scale attracted the admiration of collectors and authors, who considered him the founder of the Leiden school of *fijnschilders*. In terms of imagery, paintings featuring elegant figures in well-appointed spaces became increasingly popular. Such depictions of upper-class life draw from earlier merry company paintings by Haarlem artists and the musical companies by Pieter Codde and Willem Duyster, but there was a novel emphasis on introspection and narrative ambiguity in the works produced after 1648. Ter Borch has long been regarded as a pivotal artist in developing and popularizing such refined—and sometimes puzzling—scenes of courtship and domesticity in patrician settings.

As pioneers of the innovative genre paintings in the middle of the century, Dou and Ter Borch each accentuated his novelty and distinctive character by developing personal motifs that highlighted his own expertise. Dou's niche window, which frames many of his genre scenes, not only provides an easily recognizable trademark feature, but it also underscores the illusionistic effects generated through his unique "fine" manner of painting. Ter Borch, meanwhile, draws attention to his virtuosity by repeating the skillful execution of the satin dress. In each case, the recurring motif became linked to a strong sense of artistic identity, craftsmanship, and innovation.

The thematic and technical innovations of Dou and Ter Borch would shape the development of Dutch genre painting in the second half of the seventeenth century and beyond. Van Mieris, who studied with Dou, was one of the artists who drew inspiration from the two older masters to create his own unique brand of genre painting, in the process achieving extraordinary commercial success and critical acclaim. Indeed, his work became a touchstone as genre imagery reached a heightened sense of luxury in the 1670s and 1680s. Writing in the early eighteenth century, Gerard de Lairesse praised Van Mieris's success at renewing Dutch art in accordance with classicizing principles. To De Lairesse, Van Mieris had surpassed even Dou in elevating genre painting to a new elegance. What is also interesting about Van Mieris is the shift in his manner from the delicate brushwork of the 1650s to the stylized rendering in his late works. His use of a common stock of motifs—musical parties, young women performing various activities in well-appointed interiors—helped to underscore Van Mieris's distinctive manner of painting in comparison to the techniques exhibited by his contemporaries *and* in his own previous creations.

For Dou, Ter Borch, and Van Mieris, innovation was thus inextricably linked to creative repetition, both in the development of idiosyncratic motifs and the practice of emulation. The attraction of their simultaneously novel and familiar images to art enthusiasts, as we shall see, opens up questions about the ways in which paintings were assessed and valued, as well as the role they played in social negotiations among the Dutch elite.

This book takes a multidisciplinary approach to scrutinizing the interdependent processes of artistic invention, art collecting, and social negotiation. The first task is to use the art historians' tools to study how artists appropriated from others

or themselves while creating difference in the process. I look at the motifs an artist chose to repeat and the possible meanings conveyed through those features. For example, Ter Borch's artistic persona was—and is—very much tied to his unrivaled ability to simulate the reflective quality of satin. Apart from being a striking visual feature, the satin dress also asserts Ter Borch's expertise in describing the effects of light, which is discussed as a fundamental painterly skill by Van Mander.[9] Yet despite the impression of realism, it is clear that Ter Borch sometimes reproduces the identical skirt in several paintings, which suggests that he reuses the same detailed studies. At the same time, results of technical examinations support what we can observe with the naked eye: Ter Borch builds up the vivid image of satin in several paint layers, using a variety of brushstrokes to achieve a high degree of verisimilitude.[10] Even if Ter Borch or his assistants traced the contours of the skirt onto multiple painting supports, the rendering of the material would have still required considerable skill and time, making efficiency an unlikely reason for the repetition of such a complex motif. While it may be argued that depicting the same or similar motifs more than once could eventually simplify the task, the artist still had to solve another problem. We know from writings on connoisseurship in the period that replicas, even those by the same artist, were seen as lacking the spontaneity and grace of the original.[11] The repetition of an artistic performance, such as the skirts in the Detroit *Lady at her Toilet* (Plate 2) and the Washington *Suitor's Visit* (Plate 3), without allowing the subsequent renditions to appear inferior represented a challenge in itself. The material and technical aspects of the paintings, as well as the contemporary discourse on painting, thus suggest the reuse of specific motifs in certain segments of the Dutch art world to be purposeful rather than merely expeditious.

My second major task is to establish the conditions in which the historical viewers received these paintings. Dou, Ter Borch, and Van Mieris operated in circles where the authorship of a work of art was a key factor in determining its value, and developing signature motifs was one way for each artist to emphasize his hand in the creation of a picture. It should be noted that not every segment of the Dutch art market placed such an emphasis on the identity of the maker of a painting. There is evidence, for example, that some dealers actively suppressed the individuality of the painters in their employ as they offered low-cost products to consumers with lower levels of disposable income.[12] So it is worth asking under what circumstances viewers would value paintings that were readily recognizable as the works of named masters. To complicate matters further, other artists targeting the same audience cited the works of Ter Borch, Dou, and Van Mieris while endeavoring to build their own reputations. The qualities of individuality and uniqueness were thus defined in relation to famous precedents. To understand the conditions under which a premium was placed on this particular form of invention, it is necessary to consider the purposes that paintings served in the viewers' social and cultural milieu.

It has been well established that there was a surge in demand for, and production of, paintings from the turn of the seventeenth century to the 1650s. Art historians have pointed to the economic boom following the Dutch Revolt and the arrival of migrants from the southern Netherlands as driving forces behind the growth of the art market, but the interesting question of why the affluent gravitated towards particular kinds of luxury goods still remains. It may not be feasible to pinpoint the personal motives of an individual buyer in purchasing a painting, but it is possible to understand what buying and displaying paintings meant in particular social circles. We can make inferences from contemporary treatises on paintings and connoisseurship, personal correspondence, and probate inventories about the acquisition of pictures as a meaningful act.

Just as Dutch artists sought to carve out niches in a variegated art market by devising distinguishing features in their work, their target customers strove to create an identity of their own: one of wealth, knowledge, and discernment that would separate them from other social groups. Factors in different areas of Dutch life, including the newly formed political system that left the power in the hands of wealthy commoners, the spectacular rise of the economy and relatively high degree of social mobility, an artistic tradition that valued craftsmanship, and the culture of collecting, all combined to produce the conditions that made projecting the identity of an art lover, or *liefhebber*, an effective means of social negotiation. As Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood have argued, consumer goods (including paintings) are carriers of constantly shifting meanings, and one way in which a culture can "pin down meanings so that they can stay still for a little time" is the ritualized manipulation of material possessions.[13] Viewing and discussing a highly prized painting by a renowned master in a private collection was just such a ritual through which meanings and identities could be established and projected. This is not just a matter of finding pieces of information that one particular painting conveys about its owner (e.g., wealth because of its cost, or piety through its religious subject), but it entails analyzing how collectors engage with or exclude others from their circles through their patterns of consumption.

Finally, I draw on recent theories of the economics of information and consumer behavior to consider the ways in which the development of the art market as a whole, with its interlocking segments, might create pressures on the most privileged consumer group. This relatively new area of research in economics goes beyond traditional concepts such as utility and price to examine the signaling function of consumption.[14] Economic and sociological studies have shown that the widening distribution of a specific product diminishes its ability to signal distinction.[15] As the market for standardized, finished paintings grew in the seventeenth century and the works became affordable to a broader range of consumers, simply possessing some paintings no longer distinguished the owner as a person of means and discernment. We need not assume that consumers consciously displayed their status to others;

indeed, some economists have argued that individuals could derive satisfaction from the knowledge that they possessed the characteristics of a certain desired identity.[16] Regardless of whether the image of a *liefhebber* was externally or internally directed, the individual's project of identity construction was executed in a social context. Even though this book focuses on artists and collectors at the top of the socioeconomic hierarchy, the various segments of the market were interconnected. For instance, the wealthy and knowledgeable consumers served as trendsetters for the middling and lower strata of the market. Just as importantly, however, the growth in the demand for cheap paintings could have driven the connoisseur's search for novelty and ever finer demonstrations of skill. In the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, the pressure to justify one's inclusion in the upper echelons of society was a crucial factor in the emergence of the demand for not only paintings that allowed collectors to express their wealth and taste, but also for innovations.

The following chapters will explore how, at the top end of the Dutch art market, the artists' interests in constructing an authorial identity converged with the viewers' efforts to claim membership in the cultural elite. The first chapter expounds on three key terms in my analytical framework: creative repetition, *liefhebber*, and taste. Repetition can result from a variety of practices, ranging from literal copying to thoughtful and competitive engagement with one's sources; this book analyzes those that generated difference and contributed to the projection of an artist's creative persona. These strategic and innovative uses of repetitive imagery were designed to appeal to individuals who identified as *liefhebbers*, a role clearly associated with wealth, but also with interest and knowledge in the arts and sciences of the period. The category of *liefhebber* enabled individuals of disparate backgrounds, including rich merchants, well-off intellectuals, and foreign princes, to interact in a network forged through shared cultural interests. The *liefhebber* was not a role defined by birth, hence individuals had to justify their designation as such through the display of taste. This meant demonstrating that they were knowledgeable about the preferences and patterns of purchases by other members of the group. Since those aspiring to join their ranks could learn to develop similar preferences, *liefhebbers* had to regularly redefine their tastes. This chapter considers how the constant need to assert one's cultural pedigree and the inherent instability of taste emerged in the Dutch Republic, and how those factors shaped the demand for paintings that combined familiarity and novelty.

An art enthusiast performed his identity as *liefhebber* in a specific physical setting, namely, an art collection. Chapter Two investigates how one particular painter, Dou, exploits that visual environment by developing his signature "niche picture." In a prestigious collector's cabinet, where a large number of paintings and precious objects competed for the viewer's attention, such a "trademark" element as the niche window helped knowledgeable viewers to establish Dou as the maker of the work. Yet I argue that the window was much more than a simple identifier. Used in religious

paintings and *trompe l'oeil* images, the window establishes the framed scenes as removed from the quotidian world, even as it simultaneously provides a visual bridge between the two realms. This chapter examines how the window, through its association with those genres, underscored Dou's celebrated ability to create a fictive world that nonetheless appears persuasive. Dou's reuse of the distinctive compositional format also took into account the social custom among *liefhebbers* of visiting renowned collections, inviting them to recollect and compare his works in different locations. The subtle variations around a pictorial theme thus served two interrelated functions: they provided the occasion for viewers to assert their role as *liefhebbers*, and formed a sustained commentary on Dou's superlative skills.

Chapter Three explores the intersections between innovation and repetition in the work of Gerard ter Borch. Ter Borch's genteel genre scenes have been regarded in the existing scholarship as reflections of the growing prosperity enjoyed by Dutch burghers in the mid-seventeenth century. My study treats these paintings not just as portrayals (even idealized ones) of patrician life, but as novel genre scenes that exuded elegance but subverted seventeenth-century viewers' expectations. The concept of "product innovation" provides an analytical tool for considering the production and reception of these works. John Michael Montias defines product innovation as a new product with characteristics that distinguish it from the existing items on the market, but I propose that the concept can actually offer ways to analyze innovative behavior beyond the consideration of the quantifiable factors of profits and costs. I suggest that Ter Borch creates novelty in his paintings by appropriating stock figures from pictorial subjects already familiar to the seventeenth-century viewer, such as the guardroom scene, the bordello picture, and the merry company. The figures are arranged in unusual configurations, however, creating a tantalizing sense of enigma. Meanwhile, Ter Borch's signature motif of the shimmering satin skirt, repeated with consummate skill, puts his personal stamp on the innovation. His paintings tested *liefhebbers*' ability to identify the associations, and at the same time appealed to them as refined works of artifice. The chapter thus examines how the commercial drive for innovation, the agency of the paintings as they helped affluent citizens perform as *liefhebbers*, and Ter Borch's artistic process intersected in the artist's novel creations.

With Frans van Mieris the Elder as a case study, the fourth chapter shifts the focus from an artist's creative use of self-repetition to repetition in the form of imitation and emulation. According to the contemporary discourse of artistic invention, Van Mieris was practicing a sophisticated and reflexive form of imitation, exercising his judgement in selecting and combining elements from Dou and Ter Borch, among others. Van Mieris's process can tell us much about the complex and changing concepts of invention and originality in early modern Dutch art. It also asks us to consider the historical conditions that made emulation the paradigmatic mode of invention. Working from around 1660 to 1680, Van Mieris's career coincided with tumultuous

changes in the economy and the art market. Political and economic crises exacerbated the problem of a saturated market, leading to a collapse of the demand for less expensive paintings. Artists who remained in the profession had to compete for the attention of the wealthiest and most discriminating of *liefhebbers*. By combining allusions to popular pictorial themes with his own distinctive techniques, Van Mieris invited the informed historical viewer to compare his work to those by his predecessors and his peers. This chapter argues that imitation and citations underlined the uniqueness and value of Van Mieris's inventions in this rarefied cultural milieu.

This study thus explores the symbiotic relationship between collectors' demand for innovation and the painters' competitive endeavors in the art market, which made creative repetition a strategy that served the interests of both groups. My investigation into the creation of distinctions in genre paintings brings out larger thematic questions—such as the significance of cultural consumption and social negotiation, the fraught relationship between imitation and invention, and the market as a network of forces that its constituents tried to shape—which I address through the three case studies. In the next chapter we turn to the conceptual tools needed for analyzing how painting played a role in mediating social relations between the various participants in the rituals of collecting and viewing of art.