

Genre Painting

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers Dutch genre painting. By the end of this lesson, you'll be able to identify and define today's key terms, describe the types of symbolism found in Dutch genre paintings, and identify examples of Dutch genre paintings. This will be accomplished through the exploration of:



BIG IDEA

Dutch genre paintings contain strong symbolism integrated within scenes of everyday life.

1. Period and Location: Dutch Genre Painting

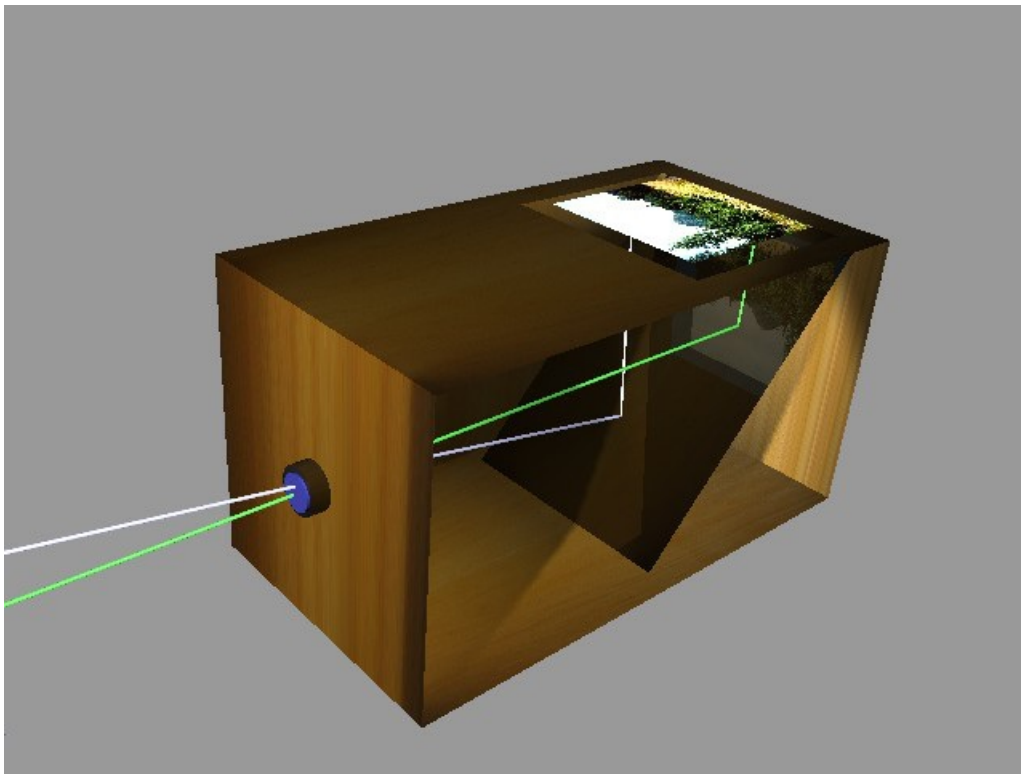
The artwork that you will be looking at today dates from between 1660 to 1675. Note that the Salem witch trials in America, in 1692, are marked on the timeline as a reference point to illustrate an interesting point of comparison between the Protestant Dutch Republic, which you'll be exploring today, and in an American, predominantly Protestant, community. On the one hand is the creation of masterpieces, and on the other hand, the execution of supposed witches.



Today's artwork focuses geographically on the Netherlands—in particular, the city of Amsterdam.

2. Camera Obscura

The camera obscura was the precursor to the camera as we know it and was essentially a closed box with a pinhole that let in light. The light could be reflected onto a surface, reproducing the image of a particular area. It essentially used a mirror to reflect light onto a surface, but using the pinhole to concentrate on a particular area, similar to how a camera aperture allows in a fixed amount of light from one direction.



Artists could use this device as a way of accurately reproducing an image, sometimes tracing it and then painting it. The English painter David Hockney argues that Jan Vermeer, one of the artists covered today, used a camera obscura to assist in the painting of his interiors. Hockney cited evidence such as halo effects in Vermeer's paintings, thought to be the result of using a camera obscura, as well as minute details that he wouldn't have noticed if he was painting from afar, yet would have detected using a **camera obscura**. Therefore, Hockney argues, Vermeer was using this device as a way of helping him to depict more realistic effects of light and color.

This possibility doesn't take away from the fact that Vermeer is still an incredible artist and one of the premier painters of the Dutch Republic.



TERM TO KNOW

Camera Obscura

An early device with a hole in one end of an enclosed box or room that projects an image of its surroundings onto a flat screen or surface.

3. Symbolism in Dutch Genre Painting: Examples

3a. Jan Vermeer

Vermeer was an extraordinarily talented artist, and his paintings, in many ways, bordered on the photographic in how incredibly realistic they appeared. He was a true master at capturing the extremely realistic impression of light—his paintings are filled with it. In a sense, he captured the detail and realism of the Dutch landscape, but moved it indoors.



DID YOU KNOW

You may be most familiar with Vermeer's work because of the movie, called "The Girl with a Pearl

Earring,” based on the novel of the same name, which references one of his most famous paintings, shown below.



The Girl with a Pearl Earring by Jan Vermeer

1665

Oil on canvas

Here is another of Vermeer’s paintings, called “The Letter.” This is composed in a way that makes it appear as if you’re hiding in a room, peering out onto a private moment as it unfolds. The woman playing the lute, which is a symbol of love, receives a letter from a servant. The use of the lute and the peaceful painting behind the woman of a calm sea suggests that it’s a love letter.



The Letter by Jan Vermeer

1666

Oil on canvas

This piece is an example of Vermeer's skill in color reproduction and understanding of realistic shadow, as well as his possible use of a camera obscura. Now, this doesn't mean that he simply traced and colored this work. The camera would have helped him in depicting realistic color, light, and shadow. It's a wonderful example of Vermeer's type of **genre painting**, with people typically working, playing musical instruments, or reading.

Next, Vermeer's "Allegory of the Art of Painting" is one of his most impressive works. As you can see, the use of the pulled-back curtain implies that you are looking in, once again, on a private moment—this time between the artist and his subject. The way in which light fills the room and reflects, refracts, and scatters is incredibly realistic.



Allegory of the Art of Painting by Jan Vermeer

1670-1675

Oil on canvas

This is one of two allegories by Vermeer. However, Vermeer's allegories lack the complex symbolism and references to morality seen in the art of Jan Steen, which you'll examine in a moment. Vermeer's **allegories** are much more straightforward.



TERMS TO KNOW

Genre Painting

Images in any various media that represent scenes or events from everyday life, such as domestic settings, interiors, parties, inn scenes, or street scenes.

3b. Jan Steen

Jan Steen's "The Feast of Saint Nicholas" is an example of an allegorical painting that offers up a moral message, specifically on the dangers of over-indulgence. This painting depicts a scene of children running around, searching for their presents from Saint Nicholas.



The Feast of St. Nicholas by Jan Steen

1660-1665

Oil on canvas

The little girl in front with a doll runs from her mother, appearing to not want to share. The boy on the left is crying, for apparently receiving—according to historians—a birch rod, being held by the impish little boy in the middle of the picture, who’s mocking and pointing at the older boy.



Notice how the house is rather disorganized and chaotic, compared to the organization and cleanliness of the Dutch home depicted in Vermeer's paintings. Another important point to note is the subject matter; although the focus is on the children, the painting functions as a **satire** of adult selfishness and jealousy.



TERM TO KNOW

Satire

The use of sarcasm, ridicule emphasizing weakness more than the weak person, denouncing vice and folly and implying moral judgment.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about **Dutch genre painting**. You learned how to identify and define today's key terms, and explored a brief description of the **camera obscura** and its possible use by the Dutch painter Jan Vermeer. You examined paintings by the artists **Jan Vermeer** and **Jan Steen**, learning how to describe the types of **symbolism** integrated within scenes of everyday life found in their artwork. Lastly, you learned how to identify **examples of Dutch genre paintings**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Ian McConnell.



TERMS TO KNOW

Allegory

A symbolic narrative; a representation of an abstract or spiritual meaning through material forms.

Camera Obscura

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Genre Painting

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