

Rembrandt, Vermeer, and the Gift in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art.

Michael Zell.

Amsterdam Studies in the Dutch Golden Age. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021. 508 pp. €135.

In this detailed and thorough study, Michael Zell presents a multifaceted approach to gift culture in the Dutch Republic during the seventeenth century. While ultimately focusing on the practice of two artistic giants, along the way he also introduces a host of other artists, collectors, political figures, poets, and tastemakers, whose interrelationships provide insights as valuable as those offered around the book's titular artists.

Referencing Ad van der Woude's oft-cited estimate that Dutch artists produced between five and ten million paintings during the seventeenth century, Zell sets out to complicate the commercial robustness of the Dutch art market, observing instead that "the gift's social economy of mutuality and honor has been sidelined or depreciated as a vestige of socio-cultural norms presumed to be alien to Dutch mercantile values and Holland's nascent capitalism" (30).

As such, in chapter 1, Zell importantly situates his discussion of the honorific exchange of works of art for patronage in a broader European history and context. Usefully adapting Italian concepts like *valore di stima* (value based on reputation) and *valore di fatica* (value based on effort) to the Dutch perspective, Zell cites contemporary figures like Reni and Poussin whose elite status as painters was assured in part by their refusal to assign monetary value to their own work, or who sought to recast the patron/artist hierarchy as a group of learned equals.

Chapter 2 examines the culture, etiquette, and obligations around artistic gift-giving within the Dutch Republic. Particularly interesting is Zell's analysis of the Dutch exchange with other states and mercantile entities, and how cultural disconnects with far-off trade partners sometimes thwarted the desired ends of reciprocity and mutual honor: that, for example, Dutch sea battle pictures calculated to telegraph the prestige of the Dutch East India Company as globe-spanning maritime power were viewed by Japanese recipients as violent and distressing, and promptly returned.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 present case studies exploring the author's main thesis that both Rembrandt and Vermeer embraced gift culture to establish mutually beneficial artist/patron relationships that maintained their independence and security. Chapter 3 explores Rembrandt's shift in role from sought-after portraitist to over extended property owner that necessitated the cultivation of new audiences by means of experimental and limited-edition prints distributed to an exclusive, close-knit circle of burghers and *liefhebbers*. Building on Stephanie Dickey's important study on Rembrandt's portrait prints, Zell foregrounds Rembrandt's choice of supporters as sitters for individualized and humanistically inspired tribute portraits against other portrait prints created more perfunctorily on commission.

Chapter 4 considers Rembrandt's corpus of landscape drawings in the context of the gentlemanly recreational practice of making plein air sketches that often served as records of the private retreat (*otium*) obtained from escapes from the pressures of commercial life (*negotium*). In Rembrandt's oeuvre, landscape drawings thus occupy a discrete category outside the bonds of the commercial market and constitute a sort of "symbolic capital" (356) for their recipients because they left the artist's hand as gifts.

Chapter 5 delves into Vermeer's visually and poetically complex painting practice via the analogy between the connoisseur's love of art and the Petrarchan conceit of the (heterosexual) male pursuit of the elusive female beloved. Zell argues that this recasting of collecting as desire played an important role in Vermeer's relationship with his long-time patrons, the couple Pieter Claesz van Ruijven and Maria de Knuijt, whose support enabled him to paint at his own slower pace and innovate in his choice of subjects. This practice is contrasted with the production of *fijnschilders* such as Gerrit Dou, who, while successful, calculated their prices by time, produced many more works, and invested many more hours into completing them.

Zell effectively describes a network of belonging and mutual respect designed to draw together likeminded lovers of art and validate their knowledge and status. In his descriptions of this panoply of artistic relationships, Zell raises fascinating and ongoing questions about what constitutes a gift in Dutch artistic and elite circles of the time and demonstrates the highly nuanced, fruitful thinking this new direction enables. As such, this book encourages a broader reconsideration of the various contexts in which artworks hold value, by whom they are valued, and why.

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Sculptural Seeing: Relief, Optics, and the Rise of Perspective in Medieval Italy.
Christopher R. Lakey.

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Sculptural Seeing will be welcomed by medievalists across disciplines. Analyzing a select number of questions in the light of material history, medieval science, optics, and Augustinian theology, it will contribute to further interdisciplinary explorations of relief sculpture as a historically specific genre. Richly illustrated, Lakey's book opens new opportunities for integrating these histories with integral issues of time, chronology, and successions of form and style.

The author focuses on examples from Duecento to Quattrocento Italy (North and Central), especially the famous Pisa and Pistoia pulpits by Giovanni and Nicola Pisano, and sculpted programs on the cathedrals of Ferrara and Modena, with further examples from Aosta, Fidenza, and Verona. "Relief, Optics, and Medieval Perspective" introduces