"The colorful trash of the Flemish School": Netherlandish art and Russian literature

Weststeijn, M.A.

Published in:
Literature and beyond: Festschrift for Willem G. Weststeijn on the occasion of his 65th birthday

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
“THE COLORFUL TRASH OF THE FLEMISH SCHOOL”: NETHERLANDISH ART AND RUSSIAN LITERATURE

Thijs Weststeijn

Willem Weststeijn once began an essay with a thought experiment: what would have happened when the Netherlands had become a Socialist state, with a literary canon championing Theun de Vries as the nation’s prime author? In the realm of the visual arts, there is no need for this kind of speculation. Soviet cultural historians allotted a key role to Dutch art, often confounding it with Flemish art. Their judgment tacked on to ideas that had taken root in the Russian literary imagination already in the nineteenth century.

Introduction

Art historians and the wider public may not be surprised to hear that the largest collection of Dutch art outside the Netherlands is in Russia, in the Hermitage. It is less well known that the Russian appreciation of the art of the Low Countries relates closely to debates about literature. This article will outline how, from early nineteenth-century literary criticism to Soviet aesthetics, Russian ideas on realistic narrative integrated the example allegedly found in Dutch and Flemish art of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. From Puškin to Ejzenštejn, Netherlandish painting was held up as a model that was, as will be argued here, not merely formal but ultimately ideological.1

In this article, the term “Netherlandish” denotes the art of the Northern as well as the Southern Netherlands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Art theory from that period as well as later criticism regarded the Netherlandish area as a single artistic sphere; the terms “Flanders” and “Holland” were used interchangeably and as partes pro toto.2 The reception of the art of this area among Russian writers and poets has been little studied outside the seminal works by Ronald LeBlanc (1991), Jan Paul Hinrichs (1994), and Irina Sokolova (2005).
The present analysis has no ambition to be comprehensive or incontrovertible, but aims to point those with knowledge of Russian language and literature to a field of art history that may still yield many new insights. It also aims to contribute to the discussion about the popularity of Netherlandish art among modern Russians, who often see Rembrandt as part of their national heritage.

A starting point for this discussion is Diderot’s criticism of the preference for Netherlandish painting at the Petersburg Academy. This preference was largely the result of Peter the Great’s reported taste for genre painting, based on the “Dutch muzhiks and babas” that he or his agents avidly bought (Stoehlin 1982). On his arrival in St. Petersburg in 1773, Diderot expressed particular dissatisfaction with the academicians’ habit of copying the works of David Teniers and Rembrandt (Sokolova 2005: 87). He considered the works of Raphael and Poussin far more suitable for artistic development; these painters had been held up as the main figures in Western art from the seventeenth century onwards because they combined intellectual subject matter with the idealized depiction of the human body.

Diderot’s words proved authoritative: in nineteenth-century Russia, the absolute artist was an Italian, namely Raphael (both Tolstoj and Dostoevskij expressed their deep admiration for Raphael’s Sistine Madonna) (Alpatov 1971: 370). When Dutch and Flemish art was mentioned in literature, it was initially upheld as example of boorishness and lack of civilization, precisely those qualities that Russians looking to the West wanted to avoid. In condemning Netherlandish artists, for whom the names Teniers and Rembrandt were representative, Russian literature followed a commonplace of European art theory that Peter the Great had apparently been oblivious to: the contrast between the Italian and Netherlandish schools was described in terms of center versus periphery, civilization versus vulgarity, and ideal versus banality. With the increasing presence of Netherlandish art in Russia, these oppositions were used in literary criticism to express condemnation of certain themes and subjects, not only in painting, but also in literature.
A Boorish Art

Russian literary criticism in the early nineteenth century imitated the debate in France and England. As Peter Demetz (1963) demonstrated, this debate used Netherlandish art as a metaphor. Thus Cervantes’ book *Don Quixote* and Alain-René Lesage’s novel *Gil Blas* were compared to “Flemish tableaux, where we see village weddings, rural dances, bourgeois ridicules, smokers, cabarets, innkeepers and hostesses, servants, and valets.” When the subsequent *Bataille réalist* presented Flaubert’s epic world as a “museum of Dutch or Flemish art”, a conservative critic compared the author to Bruegel (but the liberal press, intending to sound more favorable, called him a Rembrandt). The remarks were apparently inspired by Flaubert’s proclaimed desire to write a “book about nothing” and the contemporary French evaluation of Netherlandish art as essentially “subjectless art.” Walter Scott used the same metaphor in stating that Jane Austen’s work has “all the merits of the Flemish school” (quoted by Demetz 1963: 97-98). These remarks were echoed in Russia, where a Tsarist critic wrote of Vasilij Narežnyj (1780-1825), author of *A Russian Gil Blas* (1814), that “all his [literary] pictures belong to the Flemish school” (quoted by LeBlanc 1990: 26).

Ronald LeBlanc (1990) analyzed the role of the name of Teniers in this debate. In particular, the authors Narežnyj and Aleksandr Izmajlov (1779-1831) came to be called “Russian Teniers” in order to classify their allegedly boorish, down-to-earth satire. In analyzing this epithet, it is important to realize that art history speaks about the “Teniers enterprise” rather than about a single artist: besides the central figure David Teniers the Younger, his close relatives David I and David III Teniers, as well as Abraham, Jan, and Juliaen Teniers, were active. Their cumulative lives spanned the years 1582-1690, and their combined output, which demonstrated affinity to that of Rubens and his studio, comprised several hundreds of paintings and prints covering the various genres: Biblical scenes besides portraits, landscapes, and the “low” genre depicting peasants, feasts, and inns [Fig. 1]. Taking the name of this dynasty as representative of the Netherlandish tradition, Russian literary criticism ultimately developed the term *ten'erstvo* or “Teniersism”, which, in accordance with Diderot’s ideas, was used in a disparaging way.
Russian critics familiar with this term regarded Netherlandish art as exemplary of an “upstart” art, wishing but failing to attain poetry. The Decembrist poet Vil’gel’m Kjuchel’beker (1797-1846) characteristically deemed Rubens’ Venuses “no more than naked, Dutch, petty bourgeois women; his gods are dressed up salesmen, sailors, and schoolchildren”; the Drunken Hercules by the same artist is “no Hercules, but a carpenter, a wild man or another son of the earth” [Fig. 2]. Nor did Rembrandt’s work escape this criticism: it betrays “somber coloring, failed drawing, and a flaccid imagination”; the Teniers family, allegedly, painted only “drunken peasants, fat old women, primitive dances, playing cards, and wine” (Kjuchel’beker 1979: 20; Alpatov 1971: 367). Netherlandish art was perceived to combine, at the fringes of the tradition of Western art, clumsy figures, obscene realism and boorish humor. This commonplace of Renaissance art theory was applied to Slavic literature when it ran the risk of being a coarse and
and risible spin-off of Western literature. In the 1830s and 1840s, painting from the Low Countries became a metaphor that conservative critics applied to those writers who dared to depict the unseemly social reality around them. A novel by Grigorij Kvitka-Osnov’yanenko was reviewed in the Moscow Telegraph as “a lively painting, in the Flemish taste” (quoted in LeBlanc 1991: 579). The metaphor served in particular to condemn provincial coarseness; a Tsarist censor, stating that Gogol’s talent was “purely Teniersesque”, added that a mixture of “Ukrainian humor and Teniersesque materiality” characterizes his works (quoted in Veresaev 1933: 138).

In reaction to this negative view of a “provincial” artistic tradition, however,
some Russian poets embraced the work of Netherlandish artists because of its position at the margin of the European canon. Romantic poetry contained the kernel of the appreciation of Slavophile authors for “outsiders” like Rembrandt. In 1839 Lermontov published a poem ‘On a Painting by Rembrandt’; here, the lyric subject evokes the “gloomy genius” of Rembrandt and Byron who both understand “that sorrowful, inexplicable dream, / The gust of passion and inspiration.” Besides melancholic introspection, however, Lermontov praised the perceived naturalism of the Dutch: “Perhaps you painted from nature / and is this face not idealized!” Another author who wished to escape the straitjacket of Neoclassicism, Taras Ševčenko, born into serfdom in the Ukraine, was himself called the “Russian Rembrandt” (Sokolova 2005: 109). For these Romantics, identification with the art of the Low Countries became a token of pride. Prince Petr Vjazemskij compared his own work with the painting of a bull by Paulus Potter of 1647, and explained that “in the imitation of nature the unrefined may become refined in relation to art” [Fig. 3]. The art of Potter was also adduced in a defense of Gogol, with the argument that true poets, like artists, are powerless in their choice of subject matter (Ševyrev 1842: 222).

The ambiguities surrounding Netherlandish art in the Russian imagination are fully expressed in the work of Puškin. Echoes of the appreciation of ten’erstvo resound in Puškin’s ironic judgment of his own description of country life as “the colorful trash of the Flemish school” (Puškin 1994: 182). There is no irony, however, when his poem ‘Little House in Kolomna’ (1832-1833) compares one of his heroines, an old woman, to old women painted by Rembrandt. Rembrandt also figures in Puškin’s account of his trip to the Caucasus in 1829-1830. The countryside reminds the author of Rembrandt’s Rape of Ganymede, which is now in Dresden [Fig. 4]. In order to specify the role of Netherlandish art in the Russian imagination, it is worth quoting at some length from the travelogue. During the trip, the author examines ruined minarets, enters a Turkish harem, meets a hermaphrodite, is mistaken for a dervish and witnesses Muslim guerilla on the fringes of the Tsarist empire. He describes the so-called “Dar’jal pass” as follows:
Seven versts from Lars is the Darial post. The pass bears the same name. The cliffs stand like parallel walls on both sides. It is so narrow here, so narrow, writes one traveler, that you not only see, but, it would seem, you feel the closeness. A patch of the sky shows blue, like a ribbon, over your head. Streams falling from the height of the mountain in shallow and splashing spurts reminded me of the *Rape of Ganymede*, that strange painting by Rembrandt. Besides, the light in the pass is completely in his style. In certain places the Terek washes against the very foot of the cliffs, and rocks are heaped up on the road like a dam. Not far from the post a little bridge is boldly thrown across the river. When you stand on it, it is as if you were in a mill. The whole bridge shakes, and the Terek roars like the wheels that move the milestones. […] According to the testimony of Pliny, the Gate of the Caucasus, which was erroneously called the Caspian Gate, was located here. The pass was locked with a real gate, made of wood, fitted with iron. Under it, writes Pliny, flows the river Diriodoris. (Pushkin 1974: 28-29)

Puškin’s passage is controversial like the painting it refers to. Scholars may ponder whether Rembrandt’s idiosyncratic interpretation of sexual rapture in an Eastern landscape has some implications for Puškin’s view of his own trip.
4. Rembrandt, The Rape of Ganymede (1635), Gemäldegalerie, Dresden
Most remarkable in Puškin’s reference is that Rembrandt’s painting does not show a detailed landscape background. A few trees to the right of Ganymede represent Mount Ida, the mountain in central Turkey where Ganymede, most beautiful of mortals, was spotted and kidnapped by Jupiter. The painting’s cloudy background suggests no more than rough weather and includes a small ray of lightning (which is also Jupiter’s attribute). Is Puškin being ironic when he uses a painting from the much ridiculed “Flemish school” in the context of Romantic nature description and writes that the small streams in the landscape remind him of the urinating Ganymede in Rembrandt’s painting (Brown 1986: 451)? Puškin’s laconic mention of Rembrandt’s painting seems far removed from the Romantic appreciation of the myth, like the atmosphere of hazy rapture permeating Goethe’s poem ‘Ganymede’.⁹

As Frenkel Greenleaf (1991: 946) has shown, “learned allusions” are a literary strategy used in Oriental travelogues in the Romantic period. By comparing Eastern landscapes and situations to classical, biblical, and historical elements from the Western canon, the East is appropriated and made less strange. Puškin may be ridiculing the pedantry of these allusions with his own heavy-handed reference to Pliny. But the particular appreciation for the “Flemish school” in Russian literary criticism, as well as Puškin’s description of Rembrandt’s painting as “strange” (strannuju kartinu Rembrandta), suggests that this passage contains a higher level of parody. Puškin’s choice of a Dutch artwork, particularly an eccentric, perceivably non-canonical interpretation of a classical myth, may be a witty comment not only on the travelogue genre, but also on the Russian Orientalists’ problematic struggle for establishing Russia’s right to be identified with the West. Rembrandt painted a scene from classical mythology in a highly idiosyncratic way: rejecting the established, learned interpretation, he respected the limitations of nature and replaced the traditional idealized adolescent with a toddler whose weight could be lifted by a real eagle. If Puškin’s passage is indeed ironic, he is repeating an irony that he first perceived in Rembrandt.

Puškin’s offhand reference to Rembrandt’s work illustrates the developing taste for Netherlandish art. Known from the aristocratic collections and through
prints, it came to be amassed throughout the Russian empire by wealthy collectors who often linked collecting with the idea of public education (Senenko 2005: 13). Although many factors shaped the Russian art market in the nineteenth century, it does not seem absurd to relate this interest to the discussions about contemporary literature and its rejection of academic norms, a cult of truth to life, and an interest in acute social themes. A change in atmosphere is perceptible in Vissarion Belinskij’s *Literary Review for the Year 1847*, which stressed the potential of literature to improve on human character by showing life’s vulgar and dark sides. Thus, when comparing Teniers and Raphael, the author evaluated Netherlandish art positively and did not automatically prefer the Italian master: “I do not trust the aesthetic sense and taste of people holding still in admiration in front of Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna* while they turn away in despise from Teniers, who shows us the prose of life, the vulgar, the dirt” (Belinskij 1948, III: 743). Belinskij concluded: “The Flemish school – I passionately love these scenes taken from life […] The Italians idealize the body, the Flemings life itself.”

These ideas soon found a wider literary audience; in 1856, one critic described the qualities of Gončarov’s work precisely with a comparison to a gallery of “Flemish” artists (in effect, all but one were Dutchmen):

[A]n uncovering of pure poetry in what everyone considered lifeless prose – this is what brings Goncharov close to Van der Neer and Ostade, and what will perhaps, with time, make him a contemporary Fleming [...] It seems that [Gončarov] has quite the right to go into the gallery of the Imperial Hermitage, stop in the middle of the room filled with the greatest works of the Flemish masters, take a joyous look around him and feel his soul brighten. At that moment he should feel himself to be fully an artist and fully delight in the works by artists who are similar to him in that spirit which animates them. And he should pronounce the immortal names of Van Ostade, Van Mieris, Teniers, Dou, Van der Neer, Hobbema, and Van de Velde as the names of great yet kindred artists (Družinin 1988: 128-129).

Belinskij’s ideas may also have inspired Aleksandr Gercen to find parallels between Netherlandish art and Russian literature. In a lambasting of literary...
censorship, Gercen (1954-1966, XIV: 269) contrasted the “weak Petersburg nerves”, oblivious to the harsh reality around them, to the “disturbing” images by the “butcher” Rubens and the “executioner” Rembrandt who graphically presented painfully contorted bodies and decomposing corpses (Gercen may have seen relevant paintings of crucifixions and a Raising of Lazarus at an exhibition in Manchester). Gercen also compared Rembrandt to Shakespeare because of both artists’ ability to portray the “light and dark” sides of life. However, his greatest praise went to an unpretentious Madonna by Van Dyck in the Galleria Corsini in Rome (Gercen 1954-1966, V: 51; VIII: 386) [Fig. 5].

5. Anthony van Dyck, ‘Madonna della Paglia’, Galleria Corsini, Rome
The People’s Art

The predilection for Netherlandish art by self-avowed socialists like Belinskij and Gercen was contemporary to developments in France. There, Hippolyte Taine defended the art of the Low Countries in an extended comparison of Rembrandt to Balzac. Allegedly, the Dutch painter and the French writer probe deeply in the hidden abyss of life; apparently practicing their “*christianisme véritable*” they discover the offended and the depressed:

[L]e peuple obscur des pauvres, [...] la populace fangeuse et souffrante d’une grande ville et d’un mauvais climat, le gueux bancal, la vieille idiote bouffie [...] toute la foule grouillante des passions mauvaises et des misères hideuses qui pullulent dans nos civilisations comme des vers dans un arbre pourri. (Taine 1918: 75-77)

Among the people the devout artist encounters the “eternal Christ” who may live in a shabby room, in a Dutch tavern, or beneath the sun of Jerusalem. Taine presents Rembrandt as the people’s painter: next to “aristocratic” painters, “*il est peuple*”.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Netherlandish art was recognized generally as an art with social significance. Il’ja Repin (1970: 214, 251) expressed his appreciation for Rembrandt (as well as his dislike for the “artificial” work of Raphael) using the terms of literary criticism; he found that the atmosphere of his paintings “always remind one of that immortal aura of poetry”. But when Repin visited Amsterdam, he ended up appreciating Frans Hals even more. Through Repin’s work a taste for Netherlandish art reached the Itinerants, the group of painters who turned away from the academy and began to look to the life of the people for their subjects and inspiration. The critic generally regarded as their ideologue, Vladimir Stasov (1952: 260-266), included “the Dutch artists of old of the seventeenth century” in the select group of “non-decadent” painters who served them as models. Stasov added that the art of the Itinerants was “the blood brother of Russian literature”. It comes as a surprise that Repin’s correspondent Tolstoj, when defining a theory of art in his *What is Art?* (1894), did not cite Netherlandish painting at all. Indeed, *What is Art?* concluded by rejecting the Western European canon, including Raphael, Leonardo and the “absurd”
Michelangelo, in favor of genre scenes that are accessible to the illiterate masses and depict acts of human kindness and simple laborers. Tolstoj introduced Millet as an exemplary artist. Given this master’s own imitations of Dutch genre painting, it is remarkable that Tolstoj did not even mention Rembrandt’s name (Doesschate Chu 1974: 37-39). Perhaps he recognized that the Dutch depicted their scenes of low life, farmers, and beggars, without demonstrable pity for their subjects, an observation vindicated by modern historiography. More plausible, however, is that the Netherlandish artists simply did not exist for Tolstoj — his taste was similar to Dostoevskij’s who kept a photograph of Raphael’s Sistine Madonna on his desk, but was silent on painters of the European periphery.13

Total ignorance about the Dutch masters, however, can hardly have been the reason for Tolstoj’s omission. The Symbolist poet Valerij Brjusov, who visited the Netherlands in 1913, referred not only to Rembrandt but also to Vermeer, Frans Hals, Jan Steen, Meindert Hobema and Adriaen van Ostade (Hinrichs 1994: 15-16). He introduced these artists in his poetry, apparently expecting the reader to visualize the images they painted. “Seduced by the art of Rembrandt”, Il’ja Ėrenburg (1966: 151) too traveled to the Netherlands, and he recognized his own activities as a poet in the misunderstood work of painters like Rembrandt: “There were years that no one knocked on his door.”

Tolstoj’s surroundings witnessed a sophisticated evaluation of Rembrandt in the work of Leonid Pasternak, member of the Academy in St. Petersburg and Boris’ father. As one of Tolstoj’s close friends, Pasternak illustrated War and Peace and Resurrection. He claimed to have felt “very proud” when one of his portraits of Tolstoj was hung next to a Rembrandt (Pasternak 1960: 128). Again, his appreciation was largely inspired not by pictorial, but by ideological notions. Pasternak wrote a book about Rembrandt which combined a focus on Rembrandt’s work as remote from the European canon with praise for the painter’s interest in the lower classes, addressing the role of the Jews in Rembrandt’s art in particular. The book concluded by eulogizing Rembrandt and Judaism, referring to Theodor Herzl, Palestine, and the downtrodden Jewish quarters of Odessa — where poor craftsmen revered pictures of the Zionist philanthropist Montefiore, hanging on the walls of their humble quarters (Pasternak 1923; Gibian 1983: 205).
Total identification with Rembrandt as outsider artist occurs in Mandel'stam’s well-known poem “Like the Martyr of Light and Shade, Rembrandt”, written in 1937. The lyrical subject calls Rembrandt his “splendid brother, master, and father”. The formula “martyr” echoes the older ideas of Rembrandt as the “people’s artist” and a “gloomy genius” (Langerak 1993). Harder to interpret is the poem’s reference to a “shining jewel case in a harem” – Rembrandt never painted a harem; again, the artist is presented as a role model to the Russian poet, an isolated and eccentric, almost “Asian” figure threatened by the establishment.

Mandel’stam’s lyrical subject requests “forgiveness” from Rembrandt. This mirrors a statement by Majakovskij. At the end of 1928, the New Left Front in Art, one of his “ultra-revolutionary” literary organizations, reported that Majakovskij had stated publicly, “I pardon Rembrandt.” Majakovskij, who had deemed it “high time that bullets splatter the walls of museums” and wished to “put against the wall” White Guardists as well as paintings by Raphael, left his modernist standpoint for a moment in order to “pardon” one of the Old Masters (quoted by Erenburg 1962: 246, 251). It seems no coincidence that he chose Rembrandt. In contrast, Mandel’stam’s poem, written at the onset of Stalin’s Great Purge (which would result in the poet’s death one year later), asked for forgiveness for poetical license itself, recognizing that Rembrandt’s work had come to symbolize a struggle for acceptance.

Immediately after the October Revolution, when art was seen as a means of educating the illiterate and uncivilized masses, private collections were opened to the public or parcelled out to so-called Proletarian Museums (Senenko 2005: 17, 23). The redistribution of nationalized artworks during the Soviet era resulted in the dispersal of high-quality Dutch and Flemish painting to remote places such as Irkutsk, Žitomir, and Chabarovsk. The incorporation of this art in the Socialist artistic canon, however, was not immediate. Soviet thought initially aimed at merely demonstrating how artists and writers were determined by their social context. It proceeded to appropriate the Old Masters as Socialists avant la lettre only at a later stage (see Van het Reve 1954). Beginning in 1928, museums arranged their canvases according to their class origin and function. Soon, however, a chronological exposition was adopted based on the historical evolution

The pre-Revolutionary Futurists not only condemned realism in literature, calling to dump the works of Puškin and Tolstoj overboard from the “ship of Modernity”. Malevič also wished to incinerate the work of Rubens and contemplate the ashes, out of which “a mass of ideas will arise in a man, ideas more alive, maybe, than an actual image” (quoted by Gutkin 1999: 43; AA.vv. 1919: 2). Soon the desire of Soviet artists to expunge elements of modernism from their work led to a renewed wish to base their work on historical foundations.

When the art of Repin, which was disparaged in the early years of Communism, was championed as the cornerstone of the Association of Proletarian Painters the Netherlandish tradition was also allowed back into the canon. These developments were legitimized by Lenin’s avowed dislike for modern art. Together with Repin, Rubens and Rembrandt became the “three R’s” learned by every Soviet schoolchild as the founding fathers of realist art. A high official of Soviet academism declared in a lecture to the Moscow artists in March 1933 that:

Socialist Realism is Rembrandt, Rubens, and Repin put to serve the working class. You undoubtedly know that Marx preferred Rembrandt to Raphael […] that Lenin saw Rembrandt, Rubens, and Repin as artists from whom our painters should learn, whom our painters should take as the starting point (Gronskij 1935: 285).

Issue after issue of Iskusstvo, the monthly organ of the Union of Soviet Artists, was devoted to the “deep psychological understanding of Rembrandt’s images of the people” or Rubens’s “praise of the richness and many-sidedness of the material world” (which seems to have inspired another academician to call Khachaturian the “Rubens of our music”) (Golomstock 1990: 152). But Soviet literary criticism also rediscovered Netherlandish art as a tool to interpret early nineteenth-century literature: when the writings of an eighteenth-century “proto-naturalist” were given their place in the canon of Socialist Realism, they were compared to “Flemish art […] [that] consists in the true-to-life accuracy of his scenes of everyday life, in the coarse, naturalistic succulence of his genre sketches” (Stepanov 1941: 289-290). Writers and artists alike made fruitful use of Marx himself who had stated that “Rembrandt painted the Mother of God
as a Dutch peasant woman”, and whose call for the heroes of the 1848 revolutions to be depicted “in severe Rembrandtish colors in all their living truth” was proposed as a literary slogan during the Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers in 1954 (Aa.vv. 1955: 409; Baxandall & Morawski 1977: 60; Cullerne Bown 1998: 181).

The Dialectic of Art History

The Soviet study of the seventeenth-century art market in the Netherlands gave rise to various interpretations based on historical materialism. That a capitalist society produced an abundance of supposedly realist art was not immediately seen as a problem. Next to David and Courbet, whose work was associated with the French Revolution and the Paris Commune respectively, most Netherlandish masters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were allowed into the Socialist canon. In spite of the diversity of their works, these different artists were linked by the common banner of narodnost’, an ambiguous notion singling out artworks emanating from the people, accessible to the people, or revelatory of the life of the people, or a combination of these things. As Socialist Realism demanded “a true and historically concrete depiction of reality in its revolutionary development” of the artist, Netherlandish painting fulfilled both standards. Not only was the mode of representation deemed to be realistic, but the civilization depicted was also seen as one of anti-feudal “revolution”.

In the words of the Czech art historian Jaromír Sípa, which may represent a widely shared Marxist conception, the Dutch masters “speak directly to us, because in their time they expressed the feelings of a society that had taken a new and progressive economic and cultural path, which dealt a deadly blow to the feudal system”. Sípa compares the Dutch political history of the sixteenth and seventeenth century to a “revolution” that “ended in the defeat of absolutism and a victory for the Dutch bourgeoisie, which now harvested the fruit of the long and heroic struggle of large sections of the people.” This revolution engendered “the birth of a new conception of genre painting, characterized by an unmediated, direct approach at life itself”; exemplary is the work of the Flemish-born Adriaen Brouwer, “which describes with a lot of truth and humor
the life of broad strata of the Dutch people” (Sípa 1955: 295, 297-299).

Sípa does not explain the irony inherent in the Socialists’ interpretation of the Dutch “Golden Age”. Its “revolutionary” society had resulted, according to Marx himself, in a country of “classic capitalism”, ruled by the bourgeoisie; no other country had witnessed such extreme contrasts between the classes, such a large proletariat, and such low wages (Sípa 1955: 300; Vipper 1957: 6). Dutch realism, which replaced the hermetic mythologies of the aristocracy and the addictive propaganda of the church, was deemed the token style of the bourgeoisie. The Netherlandish art market, firmly rooted in the nascent capitalist society in Antwerp and Amsterdam, apparently had realism as its preferred subject matter (consistent Marxist thinkers concluded that Dutch art was a beautiful surface hiding an ugly reality; cf. Alpatov 1964, II: 260). Thus, Socialist aesthetics would have been truer to its own doctrines if it would have answered Malevich’s wish to burn the art of Rubens.

Instead, realism became the hallmark of Soviet art and literature. When Brecht (1959, V: 156-157), in his letter to the New York Workers’ Theater of 1934, defended Gor’kij’s *Mother* as a presentation of “seemingly commonplace events in despised flats” and contrasted it to “the famous deeds of generals and statesmen as they appear in the textbooks”, he, the avowed enemy of the middle classes, used a tiers état argument championing the choice of subject matter of the bourgeoisie. This paradox was recognized by Gor’kij himself; in the Conference of Writers, Composers, Painters and Movie Directors of 1935 he criticized Soviet painting as “too photographic”, pleading for a more visionary art able to depict reality in its progressive revolution. Gor’kij stated that he was “no naturalist”. he stood for “literature which rises above existing reality”, which means that it envisions the “reality of the future” (quoted by Gutkin 1999: 39).

One way of solving the problem of integrating Netherlandish art in the canon of historical materialism was stressing the individual genius of those artists who were supposed to have been successful in spite of the capitalist foundation of their art market. Thus, when discussing Netherlandish masters Socialist art history focused on Rembrandt and repeated the argument of Erenburg and Mandel’stam: due to his refusal to comply with the demands of his patrons and
the mechanisms of the market, Rembrandt would have been an isolated and rebellious figure. Even in the 1960s a Soviet critic maintained that the strength of Rembrandt’s realism was that he “remained true to the democratic ideals of the civic revolution of the seventeenth century and that he expressed the most progressive ideas of this revolution” (Sitnik 1963: 163).16 (By the same revolutionary token, Van Dyck would have managed to penetrate to the “spiritual richness of man” in the face of rigid state decorum, and the essence of Rubens’ paintings, “tackling themes of great social importance”, was the “determined will of man making its way to combat the universe”; Varšavskaja 1963: 34; 1975: 46.) Art historian Michail Alpatov, writing in the 1960s, saw Dutch art as “expression of the complacency of the bourgeoisie on the apex of its success”: for him, Rembrandt stood out as the painter of “interiority” and of the power of listening to one’s conscience (Alpatov 1971: 88, 84).

Undoubtedly, with three large exhibitions devoted to the master in Moscow and Leningrad in 1936, 1956, and 1969, the “loner” Rembrandt became a prime painter of narodnost’ and, by extension, a model Soviet; his self-portrait first figures on a Soviet postage stamp of 1956 [Fig. 6].17

6. ‘Rembrandt. Great Dutch artist’, postage stamp of 1956
Irina Sokolova has observed that Rembrandt’s alleged “popular” sympathies gave rise to numerous speculations in Soviet literature; early examples are the play in verse by Dmitrij Kedrin (1940) and the dramatic novel by Aleksandr Kočetkov (1941). This field of inquiry apparently remains to be explored by scholars of Russian literature and Dutch art.

Conclusion
In reconstructing the role of Netherlandish art as ideological model for Russian writers, a movement from periphery to center can be discerned. Early nineteenth-century literary criticism contrasted the art of the Low Countries to that of Italy in order to condemn provincial Russians who described the unseemly social reality around them. With the Romantic poets the balance shifted and Dutch and Flemish art became, on account of its eccentric position and not in spite of it, a source of inspiration to authors who privileged life above art, such as Lermontov and Belinskij. When this art was given a role in calling attention to the hardships of the lower classes, it was not Tolstoy, but Leonid Pasternak who rose to the occasion. The appropriation of Netherlandish art as a whole by Socialist Realism completed the centripetal movement. Rubens and Rembrandt took pride of place among the “Three R’s” that lay at the basis of the Soviet art curriculum: Raphael, that pivotal figure of traditional European painting, was excluded from their group.

The early nineteenth-century comparison of literary realism in Russia to art in the Low Countries may have been one of the catalysts in the development of Russian literature. This realization suggests that the purported historical role of Netherlandish art in shaping Soviet civilization is more than a product of the dialectic imagination. From Puškin’s description of his own rural imagery as “colorful trash of the Flemish school” to Solženicyn (1997: 326), whose protagonist in The First Circle compares Rembrandt to Tolstoj, Russian writers have held up Netherlandish art as a mirror to their own work.

Notes
I am indebted to Philip Westbroek for his help with the Russian translations, to Eric Jan Sluijter, Irina Sokolova and Johan Weststeijn for their suggestions, and to the J. Paul Getty Trust for its
generous funding. I also thank Elizabeth Upper for correcting my English. Of course, I myself remain solely responsible for all mistakes.

1 Eizenštejn (1957: 51, 123-124, 170) mentions Rembrandt among the artists who have influenced his work.

2 This usage, common before the rise of European nationalism, persists in modern museum practice which groups Dutch and Flemish art together; cf. Fechner, Váravskaia & Levinson-Lessing (1955).

3 This view persists up to Jacob Burckhardt’s (1984: 387) presentation of Rembrandt and Raphael as antipodes.


5 This latter view was developed in Eugène Fromentin’s famous overview book of 1875, Les maîtres d’autrefois: Belgique-Hollande.

6 Orig. Faddej Bulgarin, Literaturnye listki, 4, nos. 19-20 (1824), 49.

7 Orig. in Moskovskiye telegramy, 5, no. 19 (1831) 388-390.


9 ‘Hinauf! Hinauf strebt!/Es schweben die Wolken/Abwärts, die Wolken/Neigen sich der sehnden Liebe./Mir! Mir!/In euem Schosse/Aufwärts!/Umfangend umfangen!/Aufwärts an deinen Busen,/Alllebender Vater!’, J.W. von Goethe, Ganymede (1774).


11 Review of Gončarov’s Russkie v Japonii v konе 1853 i v načale 1854 godov, orig. in Sovremennik 55/1.

12 Gercen (1954-1966, XIV: 553) could have seen 39 pictures attributed to Rubens and 28 alleged Rembrandts at the “Netherlandish school” exposed at the Art Treasures Exhibition held in Manchester in 1857.

13 Dostoevskij ridicules one of Holbein’s Madonnas in comparison to Raphael’s work (quoted by Alpatov 1971: 371).

14 Constitution of the Union of Writers as set out in Pervoj vossoyuznyj s”ezd sovetskich pisateľей: stenograficheskij otchet (quoted by Vaughan James 1973: ix).

15 Vipper (1957: 320) borrows a phrase from the Belgian historian Henri Pirenne.

16 Despite the isolation of Rembrandt’s genius, his work was regarded as the logical end point of the development of “Dutch realism” which had started with Geertgen tot St. Jans in the fifteenth century; the account of Vipper (1957) follows this train of thought.

17 Other stamps depicting Rembrandt’s paintings were issued in 1973, 1976 and 1983. The monograph on Rembrandt by Fechner (1964) was published in the series ‘The Soviet Artist’.

18 Irina Sokolova, who kindly drew my attention to these works, informed me that the first public reading of Kočetkov’s play took place at a conference in the Hermitage in November 2006.

References

Demez, P. 1963. 'Defenses of Dutch Painting and the Theory of Realism.' *Comparative Literature* 15/2, 97-115.


Eizenstein, S. 1957. *Film Form/The Film Sense*. New Haven.


http://www.codart.nl/Downloads/Dutch_and_Flemish_art_in_Russia_part_1.pdf


