

A Story of the Image Thoughts on an Exhibition and on 15th- and 16th-centuries Flemish Painting

by T.K. Sabapathy

A story may be intended in completely other ways. A story of the image in this instance may have to do with what and how an image speaks to us today, as we see this exhibition. In this sense, a story is to be developed in and from the display. So we ask: is there a story in the exhibition, looked at as a collective of images? Is the exhibition as a whole conveying a story? Is the exposition a story? And again, is this a story of the image from Antwerp that is transposed and now seen, told, spoken for and heard in Singapore? What might such a story then be and what might it look like? Here are, in my view, questions that beckon promising answers; questions and answers that could be invaluable additions to essays in the publication which is conspicuous by the absence of such a story of the image as it is received here, in this museum in Singapore.

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I

I begin with impressions arising from seeing *A Story of the Image* as an exhibition; an exhibition of pictures, of works put together by combining a number of materials and the mixture of medium, and of presentations generated by electronic devices. A display in which pictures appear as pictures, pictures as denying or questioning their status as pictures and objects as seemingly littered in space. These are gathered from public and private collections in one city in Belgium, namely: Antwerp. How and why is Antwerp visiting Singapore in this particular configuration or assembly of images, and why is Singapore — i.e. the National Museum of Singapore — hosting Antwerp? To deal with such questions is to depart from the frame I have set for this discussion. Although, I must say it is important to ask them. I ask not wishing to be ungracious or inhospitable. I ask so that the display is seen intelligibly and discerningly. You may wish to ponder on them, on whether they are significant and on matters that such questions might stimulate; I will discuss on this a little later.

A Story of the Image. Old and New Masters from Antwerp, is the full title of the event as a display. As a designation it prompts curiosity, thought and puzzlement. Let me pick on each of these a little.

Curiosity springs from possibilities of seeing a story, even stories, as we move from picture to picture, from things to objects and in encountering cinematically arranged sequences which repeatedly show a figure or bodies, again and again and again, unchangingly. Approached in this way, is telling or weaving a story made up of how one work or one image connects with another or how one does not connect with another? We are aware that proximity does not necessarily signal kinship. When we look at the images connectedly then we see or tell a continuous story; when we encounter the images disconnectedly, then we deal with a story that is interrupted, a story that is continually fragmented or postponed.

Additionally, do we read a story in a work, in a picture, a story told in and by each work of art, and then see in what ways a story in one image links with a story in another? That is another path

along which curiosity may propel us. We go on this path on the understanding that each of the works on display has a story to tell; that it is narrative in its appearance and its content. Is this necessarily so? What I have in mind in raising this question is: what do we do when we come across a work that does not tell a story and refuses to tell a story? A work that is non-or-anti-narrative! Such an outcome is not as far-fetched or nonsensical as it might sound, as I will discuss later.

A story may be intended in completely other ways. A story of the image in this instance may have to do with what and how an image speaks to us today, as we see this exhibition. In this sense, a story is to be developed in and from the display. So we ask: is there a story in the exhibition, looked at as a collective of images? Is the exhibition as a whole conveying a story? Is the exposition a story? And again, is this a story of the image from Antwerp that is transposed and now seen, told, spoken for and heard in Singapore? What might such a story then be and what might it look like? Here are, in my view, questions that beckon promising answers; questions and answers that could be invaluable additions to essays in the publication which is conspicuous by the absence of such a story of the image as it is received here, in this museum in Singapore.

I move on to thoughts arising from the exhibition and especially to do with the image. The image is the heartbeat of this exposition. This is not surprising as visuality is largely represented, expressed and symbolised by the image. Humans have pictured the world variously throughout our histories; and the picture as image is amongst the most potent of embodiments. And because it is potent it is, on one hand, revered, admired and adored and, on the other hand, feared, shunned and reviled. The image as art is esteemed and cherished in particular ways. Institutions such as museums and galleries are established in order to represent, publicise and give legitimacy to some of these ways. And the image as having or as promising a story, as in this exhibition, points to some of these ways.

Even as the image is embedded in the world of art, it is available for ever-expanding spheres of interpretation and reception. The writers of texts in the publication accompanying this show point

to pathways that cover conventional art historical grounds and more recent territory in which the image is seen through the lenses of visual culture. That is to say, looking at images as signaling or bearing messages about power and privilege, discrimination and oppression, violence and barbarism, materialism and banality, abjectness and haplessness etc. In looking for these messages we may set aside artistic or aesthetic interests.

We do not encounter these messages or artistic interests directly, obviously in the exhibition per se. On the contrary, as a display we encounter each work or clusters of works starkly, as unadorned and unaccompanied by explanatory texts or directional signs, as is the customary practice for exhibitions here. The meeting between a viewer and an image is a one-to-one affair, without intermediaries or intermediations. How might such a meeting unfold, develop and consolidate? How might such a relationship matter or made to matter?

Here are two topics that may be discussed, usefully. They are not new; they are perennial. Even as they are familiar and routine, they may not be taken for granted; they require to be looked at continually, painstakingly and rigorously. The first has to do with relationships and/or connections between exhibitions as displays of images and artifacts and exhibitions as publications of texts. Are they necessarily and mutually required? How are the two linked? Should they be brought together — discreetly, obviously? Or should they be kept apart?

The second topic has to do with staging an image or artifact, which is what an exhibition sets out to do. Is an image an inert thing, brought to life with its showing and seeing? Until it is shown and seen is it dormant and merely a thing? Or is it alive, possessing power and demanding in all ways? So much so a writer was recently moved to ask: what do pictures want? How then might an image be shown? How might a relationship between an image and a beholder be arranged or brokered? Are the parties in such involvements of equal standing and stature? Or are there unseen hands and unseen eyes prompting, directing and manipulating the meeting and parting of an image and a viewer? Curatorial schemes or strategies and exhibition programmes, such as this occasion, are deeply implicated in answering these questions. (I mean, and

to say the obvious, think of the obligatory guided tour by curators and the platoons of hard-working and serious-minded docents who intervene gently, and we realize that there is more to seeing an image or to conveying a story of the image than just an image and a viewer!)

I move on to briefly deal with the second register in the title; it reads: *Old & New Masters from Antwerp*. I began this presentation by listing three attributes around which I have arranged impressions of this exhibition. I have said some things about curiosity, some things about thoughts and now come to the third attribute: puzzlement. Puzzlement comes out of this claim of old and new masters from Antwerp. Old and new masters!! Hmmm!!!

How are the two registers to be connected? Perhaps there are no connections and that the two speak of separate interests or separate desires. Let us pause over these observations as prospects.

The first register signals the importance of the image per se and how it might be received. In other words, it is the work, the image as art and more, that are underlined as primary and significant. The structure of the exhibition sets out to deliver this register and demonstrate it consistently and rigorously. We are asked to look at each image closely and as an experiential entity and see if it is possible to link one experience with another. In all of this, the image and the viewer are foremost.

The second register calls attention to the maker or producer of an image; it directs awareness of an artist as foundational, empowering and charismatic. How do we move from the first to the second register and vice versa? We do not and cannot. We certainly do not and cannot via the exhibition for reasons I have already noted. Indeed, the exhibition is uninterested, even indifferent to artists as masters; for that matter, it is uninterested and indifferent to whether an image is old and/or new. Such refusals are apparent on entering the exhibition space wherein we immediately encounter Adriaen Brouwer's *An Old Man in an Inn*, Anthony van Dyck's *Portrait of a Nobleman on a Horse* and Marene Dumas' five depictions of standing female nudes, each framed as an individual image. The appearance and subject matter of these pictures slice through time and space, striking the viewer as profoundly different from one another; it is extremely difficult to forge connections

between one and another, historically and aesthetically, and as issuing from the hand of a master; so much so each image appears as a stand-alone presentation and is virtually alone. In this light, the second register as a claim is so faint that as an expression of a desire, it is unfulfilled — that is if one takes it to heart and seriously.

To talk of masters is to name the famed and the mighty. In effect it hoists the individual onto mythical planes. Are all works on display in this exposition by masters? And if they are, is each a master on equal terms? If this is an exposition of images by masters, then it invites the following question: where are Jan van Eyck, Robert Campin, Rogier van der Weyden, the Breughels, James Ensor and Renee Magritte, to name the obvious and who are undoubtedly installed in the pantheon of the exemplary? Set up against such expectations, the claim or assertion in the second register is way off the mark, even misleading.

I mentioned Jan van Eyck, which reminds me of Herwig Todts, one of the curators for this exposition. In a lecture that he presented in this museum on August 15, at which time he outlined very generally a survey of the visual arts in Belgium as a backdrop for this show, he mentioned that there are two pictures by Jan van Eyck in Antwerp which could not be shown here as they were unable to travel, presumably as they were fragile. Or, that they were far too significant to leave Antwerp without leaving a hole in the art world there. He did not illustrate the two pictures that could not travel. Here they are, at least here they are illustrated. One is of the Virgin and Child at the Fountain and the other is an exquisite drawing, featuring St. Barbara set against a tower.

But let us not abandon old and new masters or trivialise this claim. An artist as a master and invariably male, is a noble, exalted ideal; an ideal that is as coveted in the world of art everywhere as is a masterwork (or a masterpiece). The combination is irresistible: an artist as a master creating masterpieces. While it is irresistible, there are problems in terms of mounting exhibitions and in writing accounts. The problem is this: how is an artist to be displayed as bios, as a life? How may an artist, be he/she a master or not, to be developed, conceptualised as a subject for an exposition? In this vein too, how is an artist to be written, historically, critically and theoretically? These matters have not been dealt with satisfactorily

in either exhibitionary practices or in the writing of texts, generally. Often and perhaps understandably, the shift is from the artist to the artwork, from a master to a masterpiece, as though the work is the artist and the masterpiece is the master? Is it?

Difficulties in dealing with the artist per se are dramatically illustrated by E.H. Gombrich. In *The Story of Art*, which probably is the best seller in the art publications industry (first published in 1950, it has appeared in its 14th edition by 1988), he begins his account by famously declaring that: “There really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists.” He then goes on to say, briefly, how and why the word Art is unsatisfactory, but finds no alternatives for it and uses it for the length of an entire book of 520 pages, a book that is titled not *The Story of Artists* but *The Story of Art!* The artist is absorbed into the artwork and then into art as a concept, even as Gombrich started off by resisting such an outcome.¹

Claims of masters are further complicated and made more difficult by counter claims in which the status of an artists is depreciated or set aside in favour of a situation in which the work and its relationship with a viewer is appreciated and made more important, as in this exhibition. The text and the reader are paramount and not the author; or the author recedes from attention, again as I feel it does in this show. The matter in all of this is not whether one agrees with a viewpoint or prefers any one position. The matter is that we are sharply aware of these varying, competing approaches while assuming a particular standpoint and be willing, able to demonstrably account for it.

II

We move on towards looking at and talking about art, especially painting, produced in Europe in the 15th and the early 16th centuries. Of course the scope is enormous and dealing with about 130 years of human activity is demanding, anywhere. I should explain what some of this entails.

Firstly Europe. Europe is a shifting, malleable entity. While we may think of it geographically or physically as extending north

of the Mediterranean towards the Arctic and east of the Atlantic towards the Baltic and the Bosphorus, but definitely excluding present day Russia, it never is all of this all of the time. If you scan a standard publication on art in Europe, for example, you will see that Europe is selectively represented. For instance when interest is in classical art, i.e., classical art of antiquity, then Europe is represented by Athens and Rome, or to use country designations, Greece and Italy. The rest of Europe is blanked out, as not having comparable classical aspirations and therefore as having nothing. (The exhibition featuring masterpieces of Greek sculpture from the Louvre, which was held in this museum, is typical of this tendency.) When the interest is in Gothic architecture and art, then France, England and Germany loom into prominence. Greece and Italy fade out of view completely. In fact Greece never makes an appearance again. It is gone, disappears, poof, into nothingness!! It is as if Greece is frozen at the Acropolis in the age of Pericles, and has not life, has no purpose in the world of European art after that, and evermore. No one hears of the modern in Greece! For that matter, who hears of Portugal or Denmark or Norway or Sweden during any of these centuries? And the situation persists until today. And it persists not only when dealing with the past but also when dealing with the modern and the contemporary. We are only aware of Portugal, Denmark, Norway and Sweden when we put aside the idea of Europe and when we look at national histories and national histories of art. Relationships between regions and nations that constitute them are not static and equitable in all particulars.

Why the 15th and the early 16th centuries? During these years, in stories that are told of European art, there appears a category or designation known as Flemish art or Flemish painting. It is esteemed as “the new painting”. New in terms of how pictures are made, how pictures look and what pictures represented; new in terms of what pictures mean and the purposes for making pictures. New in terms of the status or stature of the producers of pictures — that is to say artists. Finally, new in terms of those for whom art was made, i.e., patrons and patronage. The new was forged by fresh confluences of artists, art works and publics. None of this new to us today; but they were new then as it was in the

15th and early 16th centuries that terms such as artists, art and public were defined, discussed specifically and freshly in Europe. Premises for many of these definitions and discussions prevail today and are recognised as forming traditions of practices in the world of art. We in Singapore employ them variously.

In what ways was Flemish painting regarded? Was the regard an easy matter and did everyone think of it favourably? What were some of the circumstances and forces that shaped its esteem? Of course formulating satisfactory answers is a formidable undertaking and I do not have the competence to do this. I am able to present a number of general observations that I hope will make some sense in dealing with these questions.

The 15th and early 16th centuries have wider significance. In stories that tell of art in Europe, they are referred to as the centuries that yielded the renaissance. The renaissance is readily associated with art and even more readily allied to art in Italy. Hence, the renaissance is virtually and exclusively defined as an Italian affair, a quintessentially Italian project. As a historical concept and a cultural ideal, it upheld artists and art, architects and architecture in Italy as supreme and unmatched. It is claimed that it could only have happened in Italy.

Here, for example, is Giorgio Vasari (1511–74) explaining why it is so in his *Lives of the Artists*. He does so in his account of Michelangelo; let us read him.

While the artists who came after Giotto were doing their best to imitate and to understand nature, bending every faculty to increase that high comprehension sometimes called intelligence, the Almighty took pity on their fruitless labour. He resolved to send to earth a spirit capable of supreme expression in all the arts, one able to give form to painting, perfection to sculpture, and grandeur to architecture. The Almighty Creator also graciously endowed this chosen one with an understanding of philosophy and with the grace of poetry. And because he had observed that in Tuscany men were more zealous in study and more diligent in labour than in the rest of Italy, He decreed that Florence should be the birthplace of this divinely endowed spirit.

In the Casetino, therefore, in 1475, a son was born to Signor Lodovico di Leonardo di Buonarrati di Simoni, a descendant of the noble family of the counts of Canossa. The child's mother was also of a very good family. Lodovico was then mayor of Chuisi-e-Caprese, near the spot where Saint Francis of Assisi received the stigmata.

Moved by compelling impulse, he named the boy Michelangelo.²

We are reminded and recall the title page of *The Story of Art* and note with immense interest that the frontispiece image that Gombrich has selected is a detail of a portrait of Michelangelo. It is no exaggeration to suggest that Gombrich has Vasari in mind; like Vasari, he too venerates Michelangelo as epitomizing the artist. In doing so, Gombrich may well be casting or presenting himself as a 20th-century Vasari, as the heir to Vasari!

Over these centuries, in Florence (principally as asserted by Vasari), but also in Mantua, Rome and Venice, with progressive, competing patronage of popes and wealthy clergy, powerful courts and nobility, merchants and influential financiers, rival corporations and guilds, entirely new schemes for painting pictures were devised. These consisted of systems of perspective for simulating three-dimensional space on flat surfaces; formulations of proportion derived from mathematical models and ideals for depicting order and ideal beauty; empirical studies of human anatomy so that the body may be shown as intelligent and active; observation of physical movement and psychological expressions to convey purpose and motivation; analysis of colour and drawing, composition and design so as to establish expressiveness and coherence; and, very importantly, the avid study of antiquity — yes ancient Greece and Rome — in order to represent ideals of beauty and perfection of form. Indeed, the view that antiquity (i.e., Athens and Rome) embodied the good and the beautiful, that antiquity represented noble standards, that Greece and ancient Rome (pre-Christian or pagan Rome) symbolised the great tradition were all invented by and during the Renaissance in Italy. The Renaissance was seen as the legitimate heir to that past. Not surprisingly, Renaissance art was the measure, the criterion, by which all art

was seen and judged. There was the Renaissance (in Italy of course) and there was the rest.

The appraisal of art as a discipline, from the 18th century until about the middle of the 20th century, was based on premises attributable to the principles of classical and Renaissance art and their histories. I recall vividly when starting graduate studies in history of art in the University of California in Berkeley in 1962, where I enrolled for a master degree programme in Southeast Asian art, which I had to study Renaissance art for an entire academic year. When asked why, the graduate studies advisor said with unwavering conviction that Renaissance art set the foundations for the study of art history even as I was seeking to specialise in some other area, and that foundation was mandated and irreplaceable. Indeed the practice of history and criticism of art is still haunted by this.

Let us loop back to the 15th and early 16th centuries and to painting. To painting because it was in dealing with painting that the new art was largely advanced. It was in dealing with painting that much of discussion on history, criticism and what we recognise today as theory was developed and established. Earlier I had listed perspective and proportion, study of anatomy and antiquity, observation of humans, analysis of composition as among dominant interests that defined Renaissance art or painting in Italy. What were they directed towards? What kinds of pictures were produced in employing them?

I single out one aspect, one ideal, one destination: *istoria* or story. The picture was now defined as a framed surface situated at a certain distance from the viewer who looks at and through it at a second or substitute world; a picture is analogous to a window in a wall that opens out to a view of a world. A world that resembles our world and yet appears differently; a world that is extraordinary and wondrous. And that world touches us by its *istoria*, by its story telling or story showing capacity. So that when humans behold that world, as Alberti reminds and assures us, it will move the soul because each figure that is painted in a picture clearly embodies and shows the movement of the soul.

A picture stages or dramatises a story. Sources for stories are derived from texts, from history and mythology, from the

bible and from biographies. Artists narrated these texts visually. In viewing such pictures, the beholder matched knowledge of texts or their oral transmissions with the equivalent or parallel pictorial representations. Visual or pictorial narrative was one of the most esteemed types or categories of pictures. In it, the human figure was the principal actor; space, costumes and drapery, stage props, characterisation, motivation and movement were sharply delineated. It was theatre, pictorial theatre.

Composition established coherence, unity and clarity. Composition established a centre, a focal point towards which all attention converged; composition established symmetry and balance, which in turn symbolised a world in which authority and order prevailed. Narrative or stories demonstrated these principles; in seeing them, the viewer was enthralled, persuaded into believing. Painting attained all of these ideals and aims in Renaissance Italy, ideals and aims that were claimed as having universal validity. For these reasons, art elsewhere in Europe was seen through the lenses of Italian Renaissance painting. Historical accounts of the Renaissance per se are mapped as the Renaissance south of the Alps and the Renaissance north of the Alps; or the Renaissance in Italy and the Northern Renaissance! It is in circumstances such as these that Flemish painting made its appearance in the story of art in Europe.

We are given a flavour of its varied reception from contemporary accounts. It appears in the *Roman Dialogues*, written in the 1540s by the Portuguese painter Francisco de Holanda, recording conversations between Michelangelo and Vittorio Colonna that had taken place during Holanda's stay in Rome. Here is an extract.

Colonna: I much wish to know, since we are on the subject, what Flemish painting may be, and whom it pleases, for it seems to me more devout than in the Italian manner.

Michelangelo: Flemish painting will, generally speaking, please the devout better than any painting in Italy, which will never cause him to shed a tear, whereas that of Flanders will cause

him to shed many; and that not through the vigour and goodness of the painting, but owing to the goodness of the devout person. It will appeal to women, especially to the very old and the very young, and also to monks and nuns and to certain noblemen who have no sense of true harmony. In Flanders they paint, with a view to deceiving the eye, such things that may cheer you and of which you cannot speak ill, as for example saints and prophets. They paint draperies and masonry, the green grass of the fields, the shadows of trees, and rivers and bridges, which they call landscapes, with many figures on this side and many on that. And all this, though it pleases some persons, is done without reason or art.

There is nowhere outside Italy where one can paint well. And that is why we call good painting Italian.³

III

Does it mean that this kind of painting, this thing called Flemish painting, is hopelessly and helplessly prejudiced, doomed to occupy an inferior status and that it is only a poor cousin of Italian painting? We cannot deny Michelangelo's chauvinism; only Italian is good! We cannot deny his gender prejudices for he says that only old and very young women will see Flemish painting as appealing. And we cannot deny his snobbery when he points out that pictures from Flanders will find favour with certain noblemen with dubious or questionable taste, as they have "no sense of harmony". We cannot deny that for Michelangelo, in all these respects, Flemish painting is not quite there and that it is inferior. But do we leave him on this sour note, as a grumpy cultural nationalist? Not quite. I propose that we keep company and talk

with him for a little while. And with Vasari too. And talk with them on two matters.

Firstly, there is no doubt that Michelangelo's and Vasari's views on art were formidable, foundational and influential; they defined art as classically inspired ideals of beauty. They were not, however, the only advocates or voices determining what good art is. There were other and contrary viewpoints. For example, the Neopolitan humanist Bartolommo Fazio, writing in his book titled *On Famous Men*, declared Jan van Eyck to be "the leading painter of our time", closely followed by Rogier van der Weyden.⁴ He was not alone in celebrating artists from the north, artists who were not born in the blessed soil of Italy. Bianca Maria Visconti, the Duchess of Milan, wrote to Rogier saying: "having heard of your fame and greatness on numerous occasions, we decided to send our master Zanetto to you, so that he might learn from you something of the art of painting".⁵ In 1431, Alfonso of Aragon had sent the painter Lluís Dalmau from Valencia to Flanders, to improve his skills. Alfonso's son, Ferrante I of Naples later dispatched his court painter to study in Bruges, in 1469.⁶ An alternative to sending artists to Flemish cities was to employ Flemish artists in the courts in Italy. In this regard there were reputedly visits in that direction, to the south, by Jan van Eyck and Hieronymus Bosch. Rogier van der Weyden is recorded to have visited, resided and worked in Rome. And of course Rubens was everywhere in Europe. All these illustrate that Michelangelo's view that good painting is possible only in Italy and by Italians is far, far from the case.

The circulation of artists as well as art works served to transmit varieties of northern renaissance art, including Flemish paintings and their techniques, southwards. Painters and collectors in Italy were aware of this kind of painting and were keenly interested in seeing and collecting it.

Secondly, when we look at Michelangelo's judgement in order to extract from it criteria for establishing deep rooted differences, serious differences between Flemish painting and painting in the Italian manner, differences that highlight independent artistic principles and values, then we may read Michelangelo advantageously and fruitfully. I draw your attention to the following, using Michelangelo's terminology but stripping it of the prejudices he

attaches to it. I tabulate the terms under two headings: Flemish and Italian.

Flemish

- devout, piety, sentiment
- represent things as seen, close observation of surrounding environment, appeal to the senses
- actual
- descriptive
- landscape, secular

Italian

- gravitas, weighty, thoughtful intellect, measurement
- ideal, classical (antiquity)
- narrative
- the body as embodied and designed

Seen along these corridors, Flemish and Italian paintings may be appreciated as fulfilling very different interests and aims. My presentation proceeds in this spirit of difference and distinctiveness, as qualitative matters.

There was recognition of Flemish painters and painting in various parts of Europe and in Italy too; recognition that these painters possessed distinctive skills and abilities, and recognition that Flemish painting was special and appealing, and recognition that Antwerp was one of the most important, vital centres for art in Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries. In 1560, for instance, the Italian historian Guicciardini, who was then residing in Antwerp, reported that there were 300 artists among the city's 100,000 residents — about twice as many artists as bakers!⁷ There were lively primary and secondary markets for the acquisition and circulation of pictures. Galleries or cabinets, as they were called, were established with appreciable clientele. Antwerp was so highly regarded that even a visit to the city could enhance the reputation of artists and connoisseurs from other parts of northern Europe.

It would be interesting and rewarding to transform this list of attributes into critical frames that enable us to look at pictures closely; in other words, use them so that we are able to interpret pictures that we see, deeply and absorbingly. I aim to do some of this in a short while. But for now and by way of rounding off these general remarks, I will focus on one of the attributes and

use it as a base to draw some of the others towards it and forward it as a critical scheme or frame. The attribute I am interested is listed as describing and it appears as paired with narrative. I am proposing that we approach Flemish painting in the 15th and early 16th centuries as the art of describing. This is not to say that all Flemish painting is only describing. No. It is a way of looking at pictures and a way of looking at pictures with a purpose or particular intention.

The proposal is not new; neither is it mine. It was advanced by Svetlana Alpers, an art historian, whose area of study is Dutch painting. She published it in 1983 in a book titled *The Art of Describing. Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*. She presented it as a strategy for countering the dominance of Italian painting and its history and ideals on the study of all European art. In that publication, she indicates that Italian art tends towards narrative while Dutch painting is the art of describing.⁸

Alpers' thesis, according to one reviewer, "struck the scene like a lightning bolt" and single-handedly turned matters around completely.⁹ Her proposal was received as a new and significantly different way of appraising Flemish and Dutch art. It was seized as pointing to alternative approaches to seeing Netherlandish painting, independently of Italian painting as the model or paradigm.

What is this thing called the art of describing? What kind of art is it? What does it do, what does it display or represent? In answering these questions I am able to call attention only to a handful of broadly sketched characteristics. To begin answering appreciably and sympathetically, we have to distance ourselves from present day or modern tendencies and values. I say this because describing or to describe is not valued today. To say that something is descriptive is to deride or downgrade it. We presume today that, to describe is to deal with appearances, with surfaces and with superficiality!

This has not always been so. There have been other meanings for describing; it has been esteemed and highly regarded. To describe is to see, to look and to observe the phenomenal world; it is to see closely, to look searchingly and to observe enduringly. To describe is to be immersed in minutiae, to experience sensorily and to revel in its representation. To describe is to know. We

no longer do any of this. In truth we have stopped looking; we no longer know how and what it is to see. In part this has come about because of the vast array of technological devices that now do the seeing and the looking; devices that possess scope and sharpness that the human eye cannot match.

There is a moving, chilling account that the incomparable John Berger includes in his *Ways of Seeing*, that underlines the loss of capacities to see by humans. It is by Dziga Vertov who directed a movie called “Man With A Movie Camera”. I quote from it.

*I'm an eye. A mechanical eye. I, the machine, show you a world the way only I can see. I free myself for today and forever from human immobility. I'm in constant movement. I approach and pull away from objects. I creep under them. I move alongside a running horse's mouth. I fall and rise with the falling and rising bodies. This is I, the machine, manoeuvring in the chaotic movements, recording one moment after another in the most complex combinations. Freed from the boundaries of time and space, I co-ordinate any and all points of the universe, wherever I want them to be. My way leads towards the creation of a fresh perception of the world. Thus I explain in a new way the world unknown to you.*¹⁰

Technology is one aspect. Another has to do with shifts in interests and modes of operating; that is to say, our interests have moved away from engagements with describing to analysing and conceptualising, to computing and quantifying, to classifying and aggregating, to probing into constructive structures and constitutive operations of the world that is visible and, more importantly, the world that is not available to sight and seeing. So much so, the cone for looking, observing and visualizing with the human eye is severely restricted and, I dare say, is no longer trusted. We no longer see; we scan. In effect we have surrendered significant capacities of the eye.

Circumstances that gave rise to 15th and 16th centuries Flemish and Netherlandish paintings were different. One of the most fundamental change was marked by shifts away from life and

living that were determined by codes and conventions laid down by the church, to paying attention to material requirements and even desires and to humanitarian goals. Consequently, relations between humans and the world altered; the world was no longer a divinely revealed entity or order; it was available for actual seeing and observing. The world could now be experienced and prospected. Humans propelled themselves as active, discerning, intelligent, and self-determining beings. The relationship between humans and the world was now anchored in empirical principles and procedures. The world was knowable through human capacities and interests. Describing the world was one way of knowing the world. Painting pictures is to picture or create models of the world. Virtually everything that was seen was of immense interest and transformed into an image, including flowers, insects, foliage, domestic, activities, objects and utensils, sexual desires, etc.

The image was everywhere. Flemish and Netherlandish cultures were predominantly visual cultures. The image appears not only as painted but also in books, on cloth, tapestry, tiles, in varieties of domestic arrangement; the image appears as maps. In these representations, the human is held discreetly; the interest is to behold the world as seen rather than the world made significant through human actions (which is the world of narrative). If we pay attention to some of these rather grave-sounding thoughts, then, in my opinion, we are better prepared to consider Flemish painting as an art of describing; or, as Svetlana Alpers suggests, as offering “a perceptual model of knowledge of the world”¹¹

NOTES

In conjunction with the exhibition, “A Story of the Image. Old and New Masters from Antwerp” (14 August–31 October 2009), The National Museum of Singapore invited Prof. Sabapathy to present his responses to the display. This article was presented at the National Museum of Singapore, 4 September 2009.

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