

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/326462092>

Dutch Windows: Female Virtue and Female Vice

Chapter · January 2006

DOI: 10.2307/j.ctv1w36pj9.8

CITATIONS

14

READS

719

1 author:



Irene Cieraad

Delft University of Technology

94 PUBLICATIONS 425 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Culturele geschiedenis van de techniek [View project](#)



UK-based Specialist Network on the Histories of Home (SSN) [View project](#)

From the material that I have studied, a picture emerges of the house of the burgher, the house on which he bases his identity. In the seventeenth century the house is primarily an external matter. It is concerned with material possessions, how to use them and how to represent them. The house is seen as a fine building, stocked with furniture, in which people comport themselves honorably and respectfully. Later, after this seventeenth-century external world had been internalized, the house was accorded the attributes of nineteenth-century "domesticity," and civil dignity became petty bourgeoisie.

The image emerging from the three sources is at odds with prevailing ideas claiming that domesticity originated in the Netherlands during the seventeenth century. Schama does indeed stress that the domain of the house was of great importance to the burgher and his place in the Dutch Republic. Nonetheless the "house" he depicts is primarily a moral house. As the abode of virtues it is strictly demarcated from the chaotic, dangerous world outside (Schama 1987, 388–89).

Rybczynski does indeed describe the domain of the house in a positive fashion, emphasizing the work of the housewife herself in creating a special interior space. Nonetheless the "house" he depicts is principally governed by "a set of felt emotions" that existed "in the imagination of their owners" (1987, 75).

Once again, Franits does indeed see the house as the place where, both in literature and in painting, an infinite number of female characters are portrayed. In his view, however, the "house" and the woman inside it principally shed light on "the subordinate position of women in Dutch society, a position oriented to the home in obedience to husbands who had more 'significant' public careers" (1993, 197).

The contrasts between the private and the public domain and the related *emotional* aspects are not of the seventeenth century. On the contrary, what is important during this period is the *spatial* separation between the indoor and outdoor world, coinciding with the legal demarcation. But *inside* the house public codes prevail. Paintings too illustrate the public nature of life in the house. Seventeenth-century sources have little to say about any emotional annexation of the home: "domestic feelings" are, as it were, fallow ground—they are not to be "talked about" until a later era. Not till the nineteenth century did the inner emotional world become extended, taking over the space within the four walls of the house and dominating concepts of the "home" until far into the twentieth century.

Translation: Hazel Wachters-Patmore

3

Dutch Windows Female Virtue and Female Vice

Irene Cieraad

FOREIGNERS visiting the Netherlands often wonder how to interpret the open coverings used in Dutch windows. Especially in the evenings, when curtains are not closed, these lighted showcases may appall visitors, who often regard the uncovered Dutch windows with a somewhat hostile curiosity: It seems a strange habit of exposing not only one's interior, but also one's intimate family life, to the eyes of passersby (Baker 1983; Capek 1934; Kruizinga 1962; Sadooghi 1989; Skelton 1971; Vera 1989). In the straight tourist view there is something sexual about this "showcase mentality" in its resemblance to the notorious window prostitution in Dutch cities.¹

In both the evenings and daytime there is much to see when strolling the sidewalks, passing along the diversely decorated front windows of Dutch family houses. The decoration of the window is a silent statement to the outside world of the lifestyle the household is cherishing or striving for. Window decoration, in combination with glimpses of the interior decoration, enables Dutch women to guess lifestyle and household composition. Decorating the window and judging the window decoration of others are essentially a woman's affair.

The relationship between windows and women has a long and fascinating tradition in Dutch social history. For example, many Dutch seventeenth-century paintings of home interiors show a woman sitting at the window. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, however, the picturing of Dutch women at the window becomes very rare and runs contrary to the dominant northern European tradition in the portrayal of women in the interior (Thornton 1985). Following the French fashion, Dutch windows became more and more veiled by layers of curtains. As a result nineteenth-

1. Window prostitution is allowed in certain areas in Dutch cities. The prostitute, scarcely dressed, sits at the window of what appears to be a sitting room and gives inviting looks to male passersby. The red light in the room is a definite indication that the woman is a prostitute.

century Dutch living rooms looked like dark caves, functioning as secluded territories for respectable housewives.

The opening up starts slowly in the beginning of this century and reaches its climax in the postwar showcase mentality witnessed by open curtains not only by day but also in the evening. The development of Dutch window prostitution is concomitant to this process of opening up in family homes, but in its sheer exhibitionism it is an excess of the postwar showcase mentality.

In this chapter I will explain what seems to be specifically Dutch in the relationship between women and windows. I lean heavily on the work of Mary Douglas (1979), who pays attention to the symbolism of borders and border markers. Following her symbolic approach, windows can be interpreted as transparent borderlines between the inside and the outside, between the domestic interior and the outside world of the street and the neighborhood.

The Gendered Borderline

In her study of cognitive classifications in several cultures the English social anthropologist Mary Douglas (1979) draws attention to the ways in which these classifications are materialized and obeyed in daily life. Borderlines of any sort, physical or symbolic, are manifestations of cognitive classifications. The nature of these borderlines, be they solid or permeable, and the way they are transgressed and maintained, whether revered by meticulous cleaning or neglected, are indications of the importance of the classifications involved. From this point of view, the Dutch window is a symbolic borderline of special cultural importance.

Its particularity is underlined by its multifarious meanings. The window indicates, first of all, the rather general classification of social reality in a public male-oriented space and a private female-oriented space. The special character of the window as a borderline has not only to do with its fragility in contrast to the solidness of the walls, but also with its relationship to the other opening in the facade: the door. Finally, the most dominant temporal classification of day and night is signaled by an uncovering or a covering of the window.

The ritual character of the window is revealed by its treatment, notably by the way it is guarded, cleaned, and decorated. Douglas pays special attention to the role of the border guards, maintainers, or cleaners, and to who is allowed to transgress and who is not (1979, 35, 68, 114). In the case of the Dutch window, women play a pivotal role in guarding, cleaning, and decorating. A window may not be the most convenient way to transgress, but window climbing by male suitors was an old Dutch courting tradition. Border transgressing in the case of the window, however, is predominantly of a monitorial and controlling nature; more often than not, these activities are of the female kind.

The history of female involvement in Dutch window arrangements will be discussed under two headings. "Window architecture" focuses on the female proximity to this borderline, and "window decoration and cleaning" addresses the female involvement in decorating and cleaning the window.

Window Architecture

The streetscape of a seventeenth-century Dutch town showed rows of rather narrow, tall brick facades with stepped gables. Each story had at least two windows flanked with shutters. A window cross divided the window into two fixed upper parts and two lower parts that could be opened and winged inside. Exterior wooden shutters covered the lower parts of the window at night and sometimes by day.

The upper parts of the window, however, lacked exterior shutters and were the main entrances of daylight in the house (Zantkuijl 1993, 211). A painted ornament on the upper windowpanes, often the family coat of arms, connected family honor with the windowpanes. Deliberately breaking or blotching a family's windowpane is still considered a violation of the inhabitants' integrity.

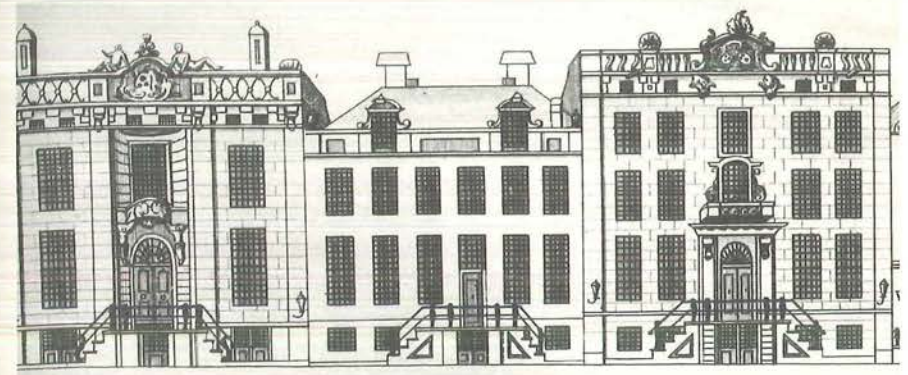
Seventeenth-century painters like Pieter de Hooch and Gabriel Metsu often portrayed a woman seated at the window of a room facing the street (illus. 3.1). She is reading a letter or engaged in domestic or maternal duties, while a sweeping maid or a child keeps her company (Franits 1993). Often an open door included in the picture offers the spectator a view of the street and the canal. The high hall-like room, the so-called front house, in which these women are portrayed was not a secluded territory but was open to visitors and street vendors. With her chair on a heightened stage the housewife secured her guarding position at the often open window, while monitoring life in the street and supervising the open entrance door (de Mare 1993). Family activities, however, centered around the hearth in separate, low-ceilinged rooms, situated above one another at the back of the house (Levie and Zantkuijl n.d., 79–80).

The discomfort of the cold and the draft to which the women in the front house were exposed probably initiated in the course of the century a restructuring of the interior. In the large and high front house a separate, heightened side room was constructed (Levie and Zantkuijl n.d., 81). When the housewife was seated at the window of this side room, her supervision of the entrance door became rather difficult, if not impossible.

At the end of the seventeenth century a new type of front window developed: a large sash window with a sliding lower part. In architectural literature this type of window is called a "Dutch window" (Muthesius 1910, 191; Rybczynski 1987, 57). Its name is not surprising, for the frequency with which this window was used in the Netherlands at the end of the seventeenth century must have been amazing



3.1. Gabriel Metsu, *Woman Reading a Letter*, ca. 1663. Reproduction, oil on panel, 52.5×40.2 cm. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Ireland.



3.2. Caspar Philips Jacobszoon, enlarged detail, *Herengracht 539–543*, *Het Grachtenboek*, ca. 1767. Courtesy of the Amsterdam Municipal Archives.

to foreign visitors. These shutterless windows gave the houses' facades an air of transparency.

The size of the windows, as well as the size of the front door, grew. The result was a more prominent and sculptured front door in one piece. The facade's air of openness and transparency contrasted markedly with the usually closed front door. The habit of leaving the front door open during the daytime, as had been the case with the old-fashioned parted front door, grew obsolete.

The more prominent front door gave entrance to a central corridor, flanked by side rooms with windows facing the street. This corridor leading to the garden at the back of the house marks a gradual shift in the inhabitants' attention, as it turned away from the public space of the street to the back of the house and notably to the garden, a favorite family retreat in the eighteenth century.

Engravings of eighteenth-century canal houses show large, palacelike facades with giant sash windows and raised doorsteps leading to majestic front doors (illus. 3.2). Although these impressive, huge sash windows seem to negate the borderline between the public and private territory, it is the difference in levels between the public and private space created by a raised ground floor that marks a development toward further distancing between public and private territory.

The front living rooms could have been excellent control towers for the monitoring of street life, but the available controllers, the upper-class mistresses of the house, retreated from the window in the course of the eighteenth century. They left most of the actual controlling to their maids, who answered the doors and enjoyed lean-

ing out of the windows of the upper floors. By the end of the century the "window attitude" of women marked their status. Upper-class women were not to be seen at the front window or to be seated in an open window, acts from which lower-class women were not yet restrained.

The large eighteenth-century sash windows totally disappeared from the Dutch urban architecture of the nineteenth century. This disappearance occurred not only because of the short period of French reign and its introduction of the window tax, but also because the tastes and preferences of the urban elite remained French-oriented throughout the nineteenth century.² The window tax legislation considered the number of windows facing the street to be a sign of the homeowner's prosperity. Houses built in the nineteenth century still bear the traces of this tax measure; windows plastered to reduce the tax burden are still visible (De Vrankrijker 1969, 62–64).

At the end of the nineteenth century the front windows in the upper-class town houses were still larger than those of the middle and lower classes, and positioned higher. These differences faded in the course of the twentieth century. The status-bound size of the intermediary space of the front garden, however, remedied the fading of the unlevelled public-private boundary.

The construction of huge sash windows grew obsolete, but sash windows of a reduced size became characteristic of nineteenth-century apartment buildings built for the middle and lower classes (Prak 1991). Brick facades of long rows of terraced houses, often more than three stories high, formed the streetscapes of the nineteenth-century working-class districts in Dutch cities.

The distancing between the public and the private was the focus of the civilizing movement initiated by the Dutch elite in the second half of the nineteenth century. The practice of working-class women leaning out of the window while monitoring street life and having loud conversations by shouting to one another was condemned fiercely. The goal of domestication of working-class women and privatization of working-class family life required the retreat of working-class women from the window. In the same vein the outdoor family life of the working class had to change into an indoor, domestic family life.

Documented by late-nineteenth-century travelers to the Netherlands are the so-called spying mirrors fixed at the window frames of the apartments of the middle and lower classes (De Amicis [1876] 1990, 43, 50, 178, 209; Koumans 1930, 60). Spying mirrors were used to monitor street life secretly and avoid the ostentatious and shame-

2. The English window tax was calculated according to the size of the window. At the end of the nineteenth century it was abolished for reasons of public health. Until that time the English poor lived in damp and dark places with no or only very small windows (De Vrankrijker 1969).



3.3. Marc Kolthoff, A prostitute sitting at the window, ca. 1934. Photograph. Courtesy of Kees Kolthoff.

ful act of leaning out of the window. The monitoring demanded, however, that a person occupy a fixed position in the vicinity of the window with the spying mirror in view. This position was considered to be harmless for disabled and elderly people, but improper for decent women, girls, and housewives.

A new phenomenon in Dutch domestic architecture of the 1920s was the construction of a bay window. Ironically, by its outward construction the bay window facilitated the monitoring of street life. The pretense of carefully inspecting the potted plants in the windowsill gave housewives an excuse for a prolonged stay in the window's vicinity.

For women in the prewar period the window indicated a dangerous borderline between honor and shame. The repression of public prostitution initiated a cautious start of window prostitution in the 1930s; prostitutes seated at the window invited men in by knocking on the windowpane (illus. 3.3).

After World War II the Netherlands, like many other European countries, was confronted with an enormous shortage in housing. Most of the newly built blocks of flats were prefabricated constructions with large window frames as prefab facades (illus. 3.4). The abundant application of window glass became the very symbol of modernity (de Jonge 1960, 67; Van de Ven 1981, 79).

The postwar architects dedicated to the egalitarian, functional principles of modern living considered the extensive glass window to be an annulment of the borderline between the public space of the community and the private space of the individual family. However, the lack of privacy in these modern "glass houses" clashed with the still dominant family ideals of domesticity and intimacy fostered by social reformers and traditional architects (Van Moorsel 1987; Van Setten 1986, 63).

Pursuing their revolutionary ideas, the modernists even dissolved the age-old unity of front window and front door, which resulted in blocks of flats and family houses with entrance doors facing the street and "front" windows facing a public lawn or a back garden, as in the case of family houses. Vegetation and green zones seemed to conspire in their suggestion of a natural borderline between the public and the private, guaranteeing at least a minimal degree of privacy.



3.4. Photographer unknown, Blocks of flats with large window frames as prefab facades, Amsterdam, Burg. de Vlugtlaan, ca. 1956. Photograph. Courtesy of the Amsterdam Municipal Archives.

In a new type of family house, mainly built in Dutch commuters' villages in the 1960s and early 1970s, the living room became a through lounge fitted with extensive glass windows in both the front and the back of the house, resulting in total transparency. The tremendous popularity of the through lounge also affected the owners of prewar houses. They broke away the sliding doors to create the same effect. Likewise authentic stained glass windows were removed and replaced by large modern glass windows. This development signaled the pinnacle of Dutch showcase mentality by its daily and nightly show of family life and interior decoration.

The Dutch oil crisis³ in 1973 put a temporary halt to the application of large glass windows in domestic architecture (de Weert 1981, 51). Energy saving became more important, at first for economic reasons, but then for ecological reasons, and the size of the windows in newly built houses shrank drastically in the late 1970s. However, subsequent government subsidies for double-glazed windows rescued the postwar architectural tradition of extensive glass windows as a symbol of progress and modernity (de Weert 1981, 62–64).

Postwar domestic architecture mirrored in its large glass windows and glass doors the spirit of the time. Modernity was hailed for its honesty and openness in matters of life, notably sexual matters. In the same period of sexual liberation, Dutch window prostitution developed its notorious exhibitionistic character. The prostitute's act of standing or sitting close to the window demonstrates the violation of the female boundary between honor and shame.

Window Decoration and Cleaning

In most of the Dutch interior paintings of the seventeenth century a woman by her presence "decorates" the window. Seated at the window, she is engaged in reading or sewing. This kind of activity seems to warrant her presence in the vicinity of the window. In addition to a functional explanation, there is a symbolic interpretation of this vicinity. The postwar iconographic tradition in art history has demonstrated the legions of symbolic references in the seemingly very realistic portrayal of domestic scenes in Dutch seventeenth-century paintings (Franits 1993, 11).

On superficial observation Gabriel Metsu's painting *Woman Reading a Letter* (see illus. 3.1) is simply the portrayal of a woman seated at the window while reading a letter, handed to her by her maid, who still holds the envelope in her left hand while lifting with her right hand the curtain covering a painting depicting a ship on a heavy sea. The presence of the dog, the shoe, the laundry basket, and the mirror on the wall

3. The Dutch foreign minister's protective attitude toward Israel displeased the Arab oil-producing countries and resulted in a temporary stop of the oil supply.

seem to underline the realistic, lifelike portrayal. A symbolic reading of this painting, however, creates an alternative perspective on the scene and sheds light on the symbolic meaning, not only of the domestic attributes, but on that of the window, the windowpane, and the use of curtains.

The hazards of love are the central theme of the painting, indicated by the partly revealed painting of a ship at heavy sea, which suggests the commotions and emotions of love. Therefore the letter the woman is reading has to be a love letter (Robinson 1974). The sunlight shining through the windowpane sets the letter in a bright light, indicating the focus of the scene. The mirror above the woman's head reflects not by chance the latch of the closed windows.

Window symbolism in European art is rooted in Christianity (Gottlieb 1981, 65–286). A seventeenth-century panegyric on the Virgin Mary illustrates the Immaculate Conception of the Holy Virgin by the symbolism of the divine, male light shining through the clear, female windowpane without breaking it (illus. 3.5). The act of the putto, who tries to veil the window by pulling the curtain, is condemned in this panegyric and interpreted as a devilish defilement of the Virgin Mary (De Leenheer 1681, 22–23). The unbroken windowpane transmitting the bright sunlight symbolizes the virginal hymen, the very symbol of maidenhood (Gottlieb 1981, 69, 289). The reflected latch of the closed window in Metsu's painting reinforces this image of virginity. Open windows and broken panes, on the contrary, are depicted in paintings of married or deflowered women.

In the panegyric, the curtain symbolizes a devilish darkening of the divine light and alludes to the defloration of the Virgin. It is precisely as an allusion to defloration that curtains are portrayed in seventeenth-century paintings. Courting and erotic scenes are often indicated by a large number of heavily pleated and semilifted curtains. This is not surprising, for curtains were also used to surround bedsteads (Thornton 1978, 145).⁴

The seventeenth-century habit of veiling oil paintings by curtains is functionally explained by referring to sunlight protection. A symbolic explanation, however, refers to the resemblance of the frame of the painting to the frame of the window (Gottlieb 1981, 76). A semiveiled painting is frequently depicted in canvases portraying women engaged in courting, symbolized by musical instruments, and also in paintings hailing women or couples with a quiver full of children (De Jongh 1986, ills. 50, 60, 69, 78). Most indicative for the relationship between semiveiled paintings and the presence of fertile women is the absence of a painting curtain in the twin painting of

4. A strip of pleated curtain also surrounded the mantelpiece. The functional explanation refers to a protection against draft and soot from the chimney. A symbolic explanation, however, stresses the known female character of the hearth as another connection between inside and outside, with references to the inner chimney as the vagina.

EMBLEMA SEXTUM.



MANENT ILLÆSA.

3.5. Sixth emblem to J. de Leenheer, *Maria, virgo, mystica sub solis imagine. Emblematicæ expressa. Opusculum votivum*. Antwerp, 1681. Steel engraving, 10.4×17 cm. Courtesy of the Library of the Univ. of Amsterdam.



3.6. Gabriel Metsu, *Man Writing a Letter*, ca. 1663. Reproduction, oil on panel, 52.5×40.2 cm. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Ireland.

Woman Reading a Letter, titled *Man Writing a Letter*, one of the few examples of a young man seated at the window (illus. 3.6).

Dutch seventeenth-century painting is full of symbolic references to the primary classifications of social reality as a male-oriented public and a female-oriented private, domestic territory (Franits 1993). Shoes, like the ones on the man's feet, symbolize their usefulness in the public space of the street (see illus. 3.6). However, a slipper that is flung about, like the one in the woman's portrait, is a negation of the shoe's use in public space and therefore a symbol of private, domestic territory. The same holds true for the hat on the man's chair: in its uselessness in the private space it is the only symbol of the man's prospective role as husband and master of the house. The laundry basket in the woman's portrait is a reference to domestic chores, just as the globe in the man's portrait is a reference to the world outside.

However, the cleaning of the boundary between the domestic and the public worlds was an exclusively female activity in the seventeenth century, preferably performed by maids. Dirt and defilement are, in a symbolic interpretation, matters out of place, violating boundaries and classifications (Douglas 1979, 35). That is why the handling of dirt and the act of cleaning are dangerous and defiling border activities, preferably done by subordinates and in the Dutch case by female inferiors. Maids not only washed the windowpanes and scrubbed the window frame, the bricks of the facade, and the steps to the front door; they are also portrayed sweeping the front house.

Popular Dutch cartoons in the seventeenth century on the topic of the abhorred reversal of gender roles depict among other ridiculous situations a man washing the window (Schama 1987, 446). This may be surprising, for professional window and facade cleaning is nowadays an exclusively male activity, even more so considering the fact that seventeenth-century window cleaning was one of the first "mechanized" domestic activities. The huge windows were cleaned with the help of an instrument, a pump in a large bucket of water. As a handle was pulled up and down, the water was pumped up and splashed high against the windowpanes. This instrument was used until the end of the nineteenth century and then disappeared from the domestic scene.

The housewife's presence at the front window and the cleansing activities of her maid marked symbolically the borderline between domestic territory and that of public street life, even though the windows and doors to the street were opened wide. This, however, was the situation only in daytime; at night, the outer shutters closed off the lower parts of the window and the door was shut. The curtains covering the window on the inside solidified the nightly borderline between public and private as did the shutters on the outside.

At night a decent Dutch household of that time turned its house into a fortress, unlike the seventeenth-century brothels, which were indicated by an open door and

a lantern lighting the entrance to the back of the house. Sometimes a maid seated in the front house guarded the open door of the brothel (t'Amsterdamsch Hoerdom 1684).

The fortresslike character of a seventeenth-century house at night disappeared in the next century. The huge eighteenth-century sash windows of the patricians' houses lacked outer shutters. The nightly solidifying of the boundary between public and private space shifted from the exterior to the interior. Large inner shutters covered these huge windows at night and were hidden by long curtains. In daytime the shutters were folded back, and the curtains were drawn aside.

The eighteenth-century Dutch elite, being strongly influenced by the French style in interior decoration, fancied French draperies and net curtains (Thornton 1985, 62, 162). The ease with which the French fashion spread to the middle classes is illustrated in a drawing by Cornelis Troost dated 1739, showing a middle-class woman seated at a small sash window veiled by a transparent muslin net curtain (illus. 3.7). Close observation of Troost's drawing suggests two layers of curtain; the muslin curtain is partly covered by a silk curtain, which is drawn aside. Other new and fancy elements, like a lace window screen and a pelmet, a boxlike fitting to hide the curtain rod, are also depicted.

Troost's portrayal of a woman at the window,⁵ signed 1739, bears resemblance to Metsu's painting, which is dated about 1663, with its similar setting of a woman seated on a heightened stage and its similar pictorial symbolism. The empty birdcage refers to woman's premarital status, as does the single rose in the vase. The visible tip of a slipper she is wearing contrasts with the foot warmer depicted next to it. It suggests her liminal status: one shod foot in the public space and the other on the foot warmer in the domestic space. The sewing gear hanging on her skirt refers to female and domestic qualities. Her suitor, the top-hatted and shoed man, presents in his outfit the public space. Finally, the context of the situation is also determined by a painting depicted in the back: the portrait of the religious leader of the Mennonites.

But what about the window and curtain symbolism? The vine tendril visible through the windowpane is a biblical symbol for fertility and propagation. It is important to note that in this case the tendril is situated outside, for in the case of family portraits with little children, the tendril grows through the sash window into the room (Gottlieb 1981, 251). The symbolic relationship between the windowpane and the hymen is perfectly illustrated by this penetrating vine tendril. The muslin curtain and the window screen only partly cover the window without obstructing the di-

5. The drawing represents a scene of a popular theater play, *Jan Klaasz, of gewaande dienstmaagd*, in which a clumsy suitor proposes. It has, however, the same relation to everyday life as Gabriel Metsu's painting: a mixture of realism and symbolism (Niemeyer 1973, 53).



3.7. Cornelis Troost, *Déclaration d'amour de René à Sarotte* (Scene from the play *Jan Klaasz, of gewaande dienstmaagd*), 1739. Drawing. Courtesy of Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris.

vine light shining through the upper part. The modest passion of the woman is not symbolized by a draped or lifted curtain but by her heavy, pleated skirt.

The situation depicted in the drawing by Troost, in which a virtuous young woman is seated at the window on a heightened stage, would, however, become a rare phenomenon at the end of the eighteenth century, even though the net curtains or a window screen would have prevented the woman from being seen by passersby. The gradual withdrawal of upper-class and middle-class women from the window heralded the accelerating process of domestication of women in the nineteenth century. The veiling of the eighteenth-century window stressed the borderline at daytime, as the closed front door did, and in fact belied the facade's air of transparency.

Nowadays it is hard to believe that the famous Dutch passion for potted plants in the windowsill is not an age-old tradition, but had a slow start in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The symbolism of window-penetrating vine tendrils was shunned by the upper classes, who preferred a solitary potted plant on a pedestal behind the window pane. Perhaps it was for symbolic reasons that the popular way of placing potted plants at the outside of the window frame was considered to be vulgar.

The overall impression of Dutch living rooms throughout the nineteenth century, from those of the well-to-do to those of the poor, was that they were cramped, dark, and gloomy: a marked contrast with the light-soaked living rooms of the patricians in the former period. The size of the windows, but more so the kind of curtains, betrayed the status of the inhabitants. The more layers of curtain there were, the more voluptuous the draperies, and the more expensive the material and the trimmings, the wealthier were the inhabitants. Because of their shape, the draperies of the upper classes were mockingly named "knickers curtains." The sexual connotation of this nickname confirms the tradition of curtain symbolism.

Curtain symbolism was very much alive in the nineteenth century, as is illustrated by Italian visitor De Amicis's description upon entering a public coffeehouse at dusk ([1876] 1990, 60). Men were sitting at the windows of this coffeehouse while talking and smoking. A thick curtain in the middle of the room divided the place into a twilight zone in the front and a fully lighted zone in the back. Like the nineteenth-century construction of a spying mirror, the habit of sitting in the twilight was another way of secretly monitoring street life. Not daylight but outer darkness transgresses the borderline and penetrates the private space.⁶ Devilish darkness endangers female in-

tegrity as was illustrated by the seventeenth-century emblem. In the same vein, De Amicis casts serious doubt on the reputation of the only woman he discerned in the twilight: "a lady who shuns the light" (60).

Unhampered by this rigid judgment, the habit of sitting in the twilight remained very popular among the lower classes, men and women alike. The naming of a special dim lamp accommodating the stay in a dark room, called a "twilight lamp," is the best indicator of the habit's popularity. Although the habit grew obsolete in the course of the twentieth century, most Dutch households have several twilight lamps installed in their living rooms for their contribution to a cozy atmosphere.

The writings of nineteenth-century foreign visitors are also very informative on Dutch window decoration and window cleaning. Like their seventeenth- and eighteenth-century predecessors they were amazed about the scrupulous cleaning of the facade, the windows, and the pavement by Dutch women. However, a silent revolution in window cleaning took place at the end of the century, when for the first time professional male window cleaners offered their services. In letters of recommendation to potential clients, these professional cleaners emphasized the welfare of maids: they could be protected from the hazards of cleaning high windows and the obstructions caused by window decoration when they were hanging out of windows to clean them.

The shunning of the window by upper-class women and the gradual process of restraining maids from cleaning the public side of the window are vital elements in the completion of female domestication. The nineteenth-century reinvention of exterior shutter blinds or "modern" wooden roller blinds, paralleled by the use of a mass of draperies on the inside, confirmed the solidification of the window as the borderline between private and public space. The solidification seemed to justify the appearance of male window cleaners.

Resemblance of the practice to the old courting tradition of window climbing by suitors did not seem to have bothered the window cleaner's upper-class clients: outward chastity had reached the point of sheer sterility. Decades later, however, the window cleaner was a favorite topic of naughty jokes, alluding to lusty women and sexual intercourse or, to put it in more general terms, the violation of female integrity.

At the turn of the century the French craze in interior decoration suddenly waned and the style orientation of the Dutch upper class turned northward. Massive draperies quickly disappeared and simplicity was hailed. This sudden change has to be linked to the evolving women's liberation movement and the plea for female rights in the public domain. The concomitant reform movement tried to free women from another form of textile oppression: the enslaving bonds of dress. Both movements had only an upper-class appeal.

In the 1920s the upper classes decorated their windows on both sides with long, simply pleated strips of net curtain, complemented by a small pleated strip at the top

6. The reverse situation, the complete shutting out of daylight, is a traditional Dutch mourning ritual. In the house of mourning even the net curtains and other embellishments were removed. Wrapping oneself in darkness by shutting out the life-bringing daylight of a "male" deity, and by removing the secular, vain, and "female" window decoration, are symbolic acts of the highest degree (de Jager 1981, 78).

of the window. The cover curtains were of the same simple arrangement, without the top covering of a pelmet box (Clarijs 1941, 158–60). No wonder the Czech writer Karel Capek, who visited Holland in the 1930s, was astonished by the scarcely covered windows: “Every passerby is able to judge (at daytime, i.c.) the material status of the household and the exemplary domestic family life by simply looking at the Dutch windows” (1934, 75).

During the German occupation of the Netherlands in the 1940s, the authorities ordered a total blinding of the windows in the evening and at night. The forced blinding during the war is often mentioned as the reason that in the postwar period curtains were no longer closed in the evenings (Vera 1989). However, the effect of numerous nightly showcases of the interior, exposed by lighted front windows, was first perceived in the 1950s in suburbs filled with newly built blocks of flats. If the openness of windows had been a passionate reaction to the forced blinding, it would have happened straight after the war and not five years later.

Adversaries linked the rising showcase mentality to the commercial effect of lighted shopwindows. A sociologist called it “the conformation to the controlling and commercial mechanisms of mass culture” (Van Braam 1966, 18–21). On the whole it seemed to be an upper-class reaction to a lower-class, or in any case popular, habit of publicly exposing one’s domestic life—one very similar to the nineteenth-century upper-class reaction to the public, street life orientation of the working class.

A national survey in 1964 indicated that a large majority of the urbanites (65 percent) did not close their curtains in the evening, in contrast to 50 percent of the rural population (Nederlandse 1966, 83). Two decades later these percentages shifted markedly. In 1984 the group of urban nonclosers declined sharply, to 46 percent, but the rural group of nonclosers rose slightly, to 52 percent (Nederlandse 1984, 183).

A symbolic interpretation of this nightly showcase mentality has to concentrate on the treatment of the borderline between public and private space at night. In the postwar suburban situation of well-lighted streets, the lighting of twilight lamps in the room did not prevent the monitoring of street life. In dark, rural surroundings, however, the effect was the reverse. Monitoring was virtually impossible because of the reflections of the lighted lamps on the black, mirroring windowpanes. The suburban two-way screen imitates the unobstructed, fluid borderline as witnessed during the day. These circumstances may explain the primal suburban base of the showcase mentality. The progressive postwar urbanization of the Dutch countryside can account for its rising popularity two decades later.

Uncovered windows in the evenings came under attack during the oil crisis of 1973. In an emotional televised speech Prime Minister den Uyl begged the Dutch people to close their curtains in the evenings to save gas and oil. Stimulated by double-glazing and other energy-saving measures in the 1970s and 1980s, most of the Dutch

recaptured their habit of leaving the curtains open. Rising crime rates in the 1980s resulted again in government summonses to close the curtains.

Although the curtains in most homes were not closed during the 1960s, they remained indispensably decorative parts of the Dutch interior. The 1960s also heralded a color revolution in net curtains among the younger generation: crude and brightly colored strips of net textile replaced the “dull” white net curtains. This trend was followed by the vegetation trend in the 1970s, when huge green-leafed potted plants filled the windows and ousted the net curtains. A vast number of potted plants, not of the flowering kind, was indicative of an intellectual or an ecologically motivated lifestyle. Although, on one hand, the symbolism of the penetrating tendril must have faded, there is, on the other hand, a definite link with the concomitant “sexual revolution” that advocated premarital intercourse.

The vegetation trend of the 1970s was paralleled by the artistic and rustic trend, when handicraft and country objects embellished windows and filled windowsills in a carefully designed arrangement. By imitating eighteenth-century sash windows, the suburban woman even tried to give her all-glass windows a nostalgic outlook. For the same reason there was a revival of scrolled wooden window screens. Caring for the plants, creation of the handicraft objects, and the choice of rustic elements have been exclusively female activities.

The window-filling trends among the young upper-middle classes turned white net curtains into old-fashioned forms of window decoration. However, among the lower classes there was a revival of “knickers curtains”—draperies that seemed to illustrate a nostalgic longing of working-class women for an upper-class outlook. The combination of draperies with a symmetric arrangement of flowering plants in the windowsill still today betrays a senior household of a lower-class background.

On the eve of the 1980s the young urban generation took the lead in a revolutionary abolishment of female-associated window decoration. They abdicated not only all types of curtains, but also the potted plants and the rustic objects in the windowsill. Instead they fancied horizontal aluminum blinds in black or white (Cieraad 1988, 133–34). In their cool and businesslike outlook and in their basic material, the blinds blatantly denied the age-old female qualities of textile window decoration. The permanently blinded windows had a definite male aura, symbolizing social distancing on the verge of inhospitality.

The same need for privacy stimulated in the suburbs another type of permanent blinds: vertical white strips of coated textile interconnected by tiny chains. The blinds can be drawn aside like curtains, and the degree of privacy can be regulated by the positioning of the strips. They even leave some space on the windowsill for female decoration: a few small potted plants or modern statuettes of white porcelain. These vertical blinds create an image of the modern Dutch household, in which the wife

of the family combines her domestic duties with a part-time job. It is as if the blinds' combination of female and male characteristics—not only half curtain and half blinds, but also coated textile in combination with tiny metal chains—symbolizes the liminal position of housewives in the Netherlands: one foot in the male-oriented public space and the other still planted firmly in the private space of the house.⁷

With the growing labor participation of Dutch women, their symbolic role as guards of the border between the inside and the outside will fade away. This is best illustrated by the waning popularity of window cleaning among women (Nederlandse 1984, 150). The frequency of window cleaning is also inversely related to the amount of a woman's education (de Weert 1981, 45). However, the popularity of the services of the professional male window cleaner is still modest. As would be expected, they are most popular among upper-class women and among working married women (de Weert 1981, 45).

The revival of draperies and nostalgic window decoration in the 1990s seems to be a temporary halt in the process, dictated by the new cocooning kind of domesticity. It is paralleled by the nightly closing off of the window to safeguard oneself in times of rising crime. The present situation is best described as a mixture of the trends of the past two decades. The exception is the front windows of migrant households, which are closed off with traditional white net curtains or draperies.

Conclusion

The symbolic interpretation of the historical relationship between Dutch women and Dutch windows stresses the coinciding of two important borderlines: a physical one and a societal one. The hymen as the historically vital physical borderline of the woman coincides with the windowpane as the vital societal borderline between public and private space. The conditions of both fragile borderlines are symbolically related, as was illustrated by examples of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings of the interiors of homes. The sexual status of the portrayed women was indicated not only by the condition of the windowpane or by its veiling with a curtain, but also by the locking or unlocking of the window.

The symbolic intertwining of female and domestic integrity from the seventeenth century onward had an enormous effect on the amount of window decoration and on the guarding and cleaning of front windows. The concomitant process of domestication of women resulted in a solidifying of the fragile borderline of the window by more and more layers of curtain. By physically retreating from the window,

the nineteenth-century upper-class woman stressed its dangerous character as a fragile borderline between female virtue and female vice. By the end of the nineteenth century even the cleaning of the window lost its solely female appeal, with the introduction of male window cleaners.

The process of the domestication of women started, however, in the upper class and only slowly affected women of the lower classes. Therefore the relationship of lower-class women to their windows differed considerably. Their proximity to the window and to the public domain became an issue in the nineteenth-century civilizing movement of the upper classes. The construction of spying mirrors and sitting in the twilight were ways in which the lower classes tried to circumvent the civilizing pressure.

The changing stress on the borderline, in the seventeenth century on the outside of windows and from the eighteenth century onward on the inside, does have symbolic meaning. The closed outer shutters at night in the seventeenth century reconstruct, as it were, the walls of the house and make it into a fortress. The shutters symbolically underline the period's sharp classificatory differences between day and night, between being open and being closed in the relationship between public street life and private family life.

The diminishing solidness of the exterior covering at night from the eighteenth century onward demonstrates a gradual weakening of this classificatory difference between night and day as regards feelings of safety. But the nineteenth-century interior fortification by massive draperies of net curtain covering the windows in daytime demonstrates, on the contrary, the secluded position of upper- and middle-class women in daily life. The dedomestication of upper-class women at the end of the century, in line with the women's liberation movement, is paralleled by the gradual unveiling of upper- and middle-class windows at the beginning of the twentieth century.

In the postwar openness of the Dutch window, by day and night, two traditions meet: the working-class tradition of the nightly negation of the boundary between public and private space joined the upper-class tradition of the negation in daytime. The showcase mentality is in its complete nightly openness a virtual symbolic negation of the difference between night and day, rooted in the working-class tradition of sitting in the twilight. The openness is not only a glorification of modernity and prosperity, but also of open-mindedness and sexual liberation. In its fading of the boundary between public and private domains, the showcase mentality is also a symbolic expression of the entrance of women into the public domain.

However, the window is still a favorite zone of female expression, and in its decoration it is a painting of class history and professed lifestyle. The latest type of window decoration, the vertical blinds, illustrates in its combination of male and female qualities the present liminal position of Dutch women: both inwardly and outwardly

7. The Netherlands still has, compared to other European countries, the lowest percentage of women participating in wage work.

oriented. The neglect of window cleaning among young women seems to be a true omen of a changed attitude.

The dedomestication of women has initiated a female approach to the window, but the present notorious Dutch window prostitution signals the alarming limits of female proximity and presence. Not just rising crime rates, but also female fear of rape, initiated the recent trend toward closing off in the evening. The symbolic relationship between Dutch windows and Dutch women, though weakened, is still a matter of female virtue and female vice.

4

The Ins and Outs of the Hall A Parisian Example

Céline Rosselin

STRONG WILL and patience are essential requirements for a visitor who wishes to get through the front door of a Parisian apartment building. At the building's main entrance, the visitor must dial a code to open the door. The residents have to reveal this code to their invited guests. Once the door has been opened by the magic buzz, one might end up in a hall leading to different apartments. Often a visitor will also meet with the female caretaker of the building, the concierge. "May I help you?" she asks as a response to an indecisive look. If there is no concierge, as is increasingly the case, the interphone will put visitors directly in touch with their host, who will invite them in. The sound of the elevator, the clicks of approaching footsteps, the knock at the door, or the ring of the bell signals the arrival of the visitor at the apartment door. The apartment door is the last boundary to cross before one gets inside the flat itself. This description clearly shows that the apartment door is one among several thresholds dividing people's private world from the public world.

The concept of the threshold is a prime concept in traditional anthropology. It is connected with the work of famous French and British scholars, such as the seminal work of the Frenchman Arnold Van Gennep ([1909] 1981) and his British followers Mary Douglas (1979) and Victor Turner (1969). According to Van Gennep, society is like a house with rooms and corridors. Thresholds symbolize beginnings of new statuses. The "dangerous" act of crossing the threshold is for that reason controlled by ritual, similar to the popular ritual performed by the bridegroom who carries his bride over the threshold of their first home together.

However, it is not only in matrimonial ritual, but also in daily rituals of reception, that the threshold of the front door, being the borderline between the private and the public space, is of special importance. Van Gennep refers to this threshold as a *zone*