

# S

pace

## Light, Order

### *The Paintings of Pieter de Hooch*

Pieter de Hooch's paintings offer a remarkable vision of domestic life in seventeenth-century Holland. Working first in Delft and later in Amsterdam, De Hooch specialised in depictions of family life, domestic tasks, flirtations and musicmaking. His pictures radiate a quiet composure; their tonalities favour luminous reds and yellows and deep browns, while their composition is often stunningly complex. He was particularly drawn to the expressive possibilities of architecture. The beautifully appointed houses he used as settings demonstrate his notable fondness for intricate interior spaces, meticulously ordered and further enriched by the effects of sunlight penetrating dark rooms. Few Dutch painters were as skilled at organising space or at teasing out its social and psychological nuances.

#### **Rooms with a view**

Born in 1629, De Hooch began his career in about 1650, painting scenes of soldiers and peasants in dimly lit inns and stables. In 1652 he arrived in Delft from his native Rotterdam; by 1658 he had shifted his subject matter to domestic life, and at the same time started to articulate and clarify his interior spaces with a more developed use of perspective. He also added more light: these Delft pictures were the most brightly-toned of his career. Around 1660, he moved to Amsterdam to better his professional fortunes; he remained there, in ever more precarious financial circumstances, until his death in 1684. By the time of his move he had established his signature formula, which he used for both genre scenes and commissioned portraits: scenes of leisure or domestic work, the exteriors set either in courtyards or gardens, the interiors generally lit from a side window at the left and a doorway on the back wall. From the mid-1660s on his interiors darkened considerably, penetrated by windows and rear doorways revealing the most brightly lit areas of the picture: the street, garden or canal beyond the house.

From the late 1640s onward Dutch painters, especially in Delft, were experimenting with the analytical description of architectural space. While there is a lack of documentation that proves any specific connections be-



tween local artists and De Hooch, who had arrived in Delft from Rotterdam by 1650, his pictures show a powerful response to their experiments. Like Carel Fabritius, he opted for a bright, light-toned palette, and broad brushstrokes. Like the architectural painter Emanuel de Witte, he organised his scenes with a deep perspective scheme. Indeed, his work displays especially strong affinities with that of De Witte and the other Delft architectural specialists, who depicted both real and imaginary church interiors, usually with people strolling through them or listening to sermons. He borrowed their preference for altering pre-existing architecture and their technique of painting the complete setting first, then adding the figures.

Far more than any of his fellow genre painters, De Hooch made the complexity of architectural space his special project. He rarely leaves the background of a picture unexplored, or a back wall unpenetrated. Of the one hundred and sixty-odd paintings currently attributed to De Hooch, only about a dozen do not feature a view to a back room, a courtyard, a garden, or a street. A compelling subplot of his harmonious yet pleasingly complex images is the relation between the house and its immediate environment, the city. De Hooch's pictures represent the intersection of urban and domestic experience.

In the typical *Interior with a Linen Chest*, from his early Amsterdam

Pieter de Hooch, *Interior with a Linen Chest*, 1663. Canvas, 72 x 77.5 cm. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Pieter de Hooch, *Family Group in a Courtyard*. c.1657-1660. Canvas, 112.5 x 97 cm. Gemäldegalerie der Akademie der bildenden Künste, Vienna.

years, two women are calmly putting linen away in a large cabinet, while a little girl runs indoors with her *kolf* club. Significant here is the distinction between the sunlit exterior and the somewhat dimly lit house, where the women hold sway. The child is silhouetted in the doorway, with a *contre-jour* effect that was one of De Hooch's specialties. Behind her is a seductive glimpse of houses across the canal, a Mondrian-like series of white, yellow and vermilion oblongs forming the most brightly lit area of the picture. The rectangle of the doorway is echoed in the tiles on the polished floor, the treads and risers of the staircase, the picture on the wall, the window to the outer room, and the windows and shutters of the distant houses. Such near-abstract matrices of rectilinear shapes are a foil for his commonplace subjects.

While many Dutch painters at midcentury were depicting scenes of family life, De Hooch was the first artist to use the courtyard as a setting. A

mainstay of seventeenth-century Dutch vernacular architecture, it was used both for entertaining and for basic household tasks, and to admit more light into the house. In De Hooch's imaginative adaptations of the Delft and Amsterdam neighbourhoods where he lived, these outdoor areas mediate between the enclave of the household and its public, urban setting. In an unusual family portrait, apparently the first to be set in a courtyard, the scene is bounded on the right by the old town wall of Delft. Meanwhile, glimpsed through the open door in the wall behind, a solitary figure goes down the path toward a second wall opening to a garden. Looming above is the tower of Delft's Nieuwe Kerk, on which all the orthogonals (the town wall, the paving on the floor, the top edge of the open door in the wall behind the family) converge, while the retreating man in grey echoes its colour and vertical shape. While the fruit-laden table and the little dog evoke the comfortable intimacy associated with interiors, the plunging perspective leads our eyes to this family's outer environment: the town.

### Women and children first

De Hooch's genre scenes are nearly all portrayals of women, often accompanied by children, usually little girls. The men are often absent, while those who do appear are more or less transient: indoors, their coats are slung over chairs to suggest they are visitors; outside, they are reduced to small figures in the distance. This is very much in keeping with the writings of popular moralists. In the ideal Calvinist marriage, the wife was to oversee the household while the husband roamed the professional arena of the city. In *Interior with a Linen Chest* the women and child are all indoors. A statue of Perseus over the doorway (copied from Cellini's famous statue in Florence) functions as a surrogate for the missing man of the household. Placed just above access to the street, this male figure is visually linked with the world beyond the house door.

Quite apart from instructional literature, the association of women with houses (and that of men with the environment outside the house) has a long tradition in the art of the Low Countries. As early as the fifteenth century, the *Mérode Altarpiece* visualised the traditional Annunciation chamber as a bourgeois home. Similarly, Petrus Christus' *Holy Family in a Domestic Interior* shows the use of architecture to reinforce distinctions between the sacred virgin dominating the middle-class house and her mortal environment, that is, the town glimpsed through the door through which Joseph enters.

De Hooch's *Woman and a Maid in a Courtyard* strikes us as a modern, secular version of Christus' picture, set outdoors under grey autumnal skies. A maid crouches on the ground, preparing to cook fish in a pot. She is framed by the tall water-pump to the right, the piece of tan fabric hanging over the back wall, and the diagonal gutter along the ground that cuts her off from her mistress. The housewife, seen only from behind, stands solidly and imperiously over her servant. De Hooch balances the housewife's figure with the water pump and aligns her with the tall wooden gate at the left, fixing her – as well as her maid – firmly in place. Meanwhile, in the distance, a man comes down the path, entering this geometrically precise, feminine

Petrus Christus, *Holy Family in an Interior*. 15th century. Panel, 69.5 x 51 cm. Spencer Museum of Art, Kansas City.





Pieter de Hooch, *Woman and a Maid in a Courtyard*.  
c.1660-1661 or 1663.  
Canvas, 73.7 x 62.6 cm.  
National Gallery, London.

*ménage* from the unseen city beyond the gate. The man's tiny figure is framed by the series of rectangles from the archway of the courtyard gate to the doorway to the street behind him, and juxtaposed almost directly with the housewife's head. While he is easily overlooked, his presence anchors the entire picture, just as he is apparently necessary to the establishment of this household despite his isolation from it.

Yet these architectural gender divisions, which also occur in his images of courtship, are curiously mitigated by the remarkable fluidity of De Hooch's spaces. The two environments are different, but linked and mutually accessible. The interior, feminine space of the domestic world is rarely isolated or hermetic, but open to the surrounding skies, buildings, streets, and canals. Windows give on to distant views. Gables and church spires appear in the background. Doors and gates remain open; the sunlight streams in across the gleaming floors.

## Public and private space

In fact, the interaction between the domestic sphere and the surrounding town described in De Hooch's contiguous spaces is an intriguing variation on the emerging concept of privacy in early modern urban society. At the middle of the seventeenth century the distinction between private and public life was still in flux. The issue of privacy was beginning to be addressed in Dutch house design through demarcating functional from recreational spaces, or servants from employers. Yet the Dutch household was not yet a fully intimate sphere. Instead, it was a nexus of domestic and professional activity: many professionals – including painters – worked at home, and rooms usually had multiple uses. During this period, Dutch painters of interior scenes began to use elements of home design as allusions to the world outside the house walls. Pictures of landscapes and seascapes, maps, views

Pieter de Hooch,  
*The Interior of the Burgo-  
masters' Council Chamber  
in the Amsterdam Town  
Hall with Visitors.*  
c.1663-1665. Canvas,  
112,5 x 99 cm. Fundación  
Colección Thyssen-  
Bornemisza. Madrid.





Pieter de Hooch.  
*A Musical Party in a Hall*.  
c.1663-1665. Canvas,  
81 X 68,3 cm. Museum der  
bildenden Künste, Leipzig.

out of windows and doors, became conventional devices in all manner of interiors, whether portraits or domestic and courtship scenes. Family groups were often posed in front of an open window, revealing a local townscape.

De Hooch's particular interest in the merging of public and private environments found a unique, poetic expression in a handful of pictures set in the Amsterdam Town Hall. This renowned neoclassical structure, today the Royal Palace, was one of the largest and grandest public buildings in Europe. Not only a famous landmark, the Town Hall was also a particularly resonant image in the city's culture and a source of considerable pride to its citizens. Three scenes take place in recognisable areas of the building, while several others are free adaptations of the interior, borrowing some of its neoclassical details. These scenes are populated with the same types we often see in his genre scenes: in *A Musical Party in a Hall*, a group of flirting couples is seated around a table laden with fruit; they are dressed in

slightly antiquated costume, playing instruments and drinking as if they were at home. These elegant, rather theatrical types are essentially close-ups of the anonymous figures in church interiors, large enough for their social identities, and even their personalities, to emerge. Such pictures are fantasies of private interactions within Holland's most authoritative, ornate and forbidding public space. Along with the courtyard scenes, they are De Hooch's most significant inventions.

### **Let there be light... but not too much**

Many of De Hooch's contemporaries were influenced by his art. Other Delft painters such as Cornelis de Man, Hendrick van der Burch and Pieter Janssens Elinga responded to his fondness for contrasting light and shade, his insistently ordered spaces, and his masterful use of perspective. He was probably the single most important influence on Vermeer, who adopted for his own interiors De Hooch's side-window format and expanses of tiled floor. (He also took up, then quickly abandoned, the motif of the open door, which De Hooch exploited so superbly.) This legacy continued into the eighteenth century, when his works were widely copied and collected.

Interestingly, some twentieth-century critics harshly decried his later Amsterdam work, viewing the darker tonalities and grander settings as a decline from the high-keyed, somewhat humbler scenes of his Delft years. This bias arises in part from a modernist aesthetic, coloured further, ironically, by an appreciation for Vermeer. In fact, the darker tone and richer appointments of these later interiors are, in part, calculated to suit the more sophisticated tastes of Amsterdam's wealthy elite. De Hooch was not alone; during the early 1660s many genre painters in Amsterdam, such as Gerard ter Borch and Frans van Mieris, went in for darker palettes in response to new aristocratic fashions.

Yet there is no denying the contrast between the limpid freshness of the work prior to 1660 and the sombre quality of his later interiors. Even his rare courtyard scenes from this period, while still scrupulously arranged and detailed, are quite dark; the only brightly lit area is framed by the doorway to the street. The backlit doorway, and patches of sunshine along the walls of rooms, offer the only illumination. Repeated endlessly throughout the 1670s, they are among De Hooch's trademarks. The late works are also quite different in mood from the more inventive and audacious Town Hall interiors, where De Hooch alters Holland's most important building according to his whim. As his productivity increased, he settled into repetition and modishness in keeping with the new aesthetic; his figures became more stylised as their surroundings become grander. Yet this new manner makes a fitting close to the arc of his career: having begun with shadowy inns and taverns, he progressed to the pale outdoor colours of the mid-1650s and returned, a decade or so later, to a velvety gloom, pierced with the jewel-like light of the world beyond the threshold.

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#### FURTHER READING

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