STILL LIFE AND TRADE IN THE DUTCH GOLDEN AGE

JULIE BERGER HOCHSTRASSER

Yale University Press 2007 £35.00 $40.00
411 pp. 136 illus
ISBN 978-0-300-10038-9

A global outlook has been part of the scholarship of history for some time, including recent scholarly histories of food as well as popular studies of commodities ranging from salt and cod to coffee and tulips. In Holland, recent studies of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the origins of the Dutch colonial expansion in the seventeenth century have raised consciousness of the Dutch in Asia. Now art history effectively joins this important discourse with a major new study that attends as fully to the 'trade' in its title as to the traditional study of 'still life'.

Julie Hochstrasser offers one of the first serious investigations about the actual goods depicted on the table in Dutch still-life paintings, which record the early stages of – and the national pride in – an emerging consumer society that remains a hallmark of modernity. Rather than worry about the contemporary terms or categories for the art that we now lump together under the genre category of 'still life', such as 'breakfast piece' or 'luxury still-life' (*pronkstilleven*), she considers the items themselves and their origins. Opening chapters consider the origins and estimations of these varied commodities: Dutch domestic production, wider European staples (such as Baltic grain, but also lemons and wine), and exotic imports, whether from the Americas (salt, tobacco, sugar) or from the Dutch East India Company (pepper and Chinese porcelains) via the Indian Ocean. In her preface, she makes her social consciousness explicit and underscores the purposes of her book: to de-centre Europe as the sole point of reference, even while studying a major European economic power; and to uncover hidden histories implicated by imperial power, especially slavery (particularly timely in this anniversary year of the elimination of the slave trade from Britain).

Holland itself figures initially as a source of some consumer items featured in still-lifes, particularly cheese, herring and beer. Hochstrasser's careful research also features rich contemporary source material, including accounts of the healthful properties of local products advanced by contemporary writers, notably Johan van Beverwyck's *Treasury of Health* (1636, Appendix I). For this primary source material alone, art historians can be grateful, because previous interpretations of such items as tobacco or alcohol have often taken the view that such substances were abused in a pattern of 'social deviance', whereas their central role in Dutch still-lifes also suggests a more benign utility. Her work makes clear the link between porcelains and oranges (still called 'Chinese apples' in modern Dutch) as well as the inextricable connection between slavery and sugar production or between colonial atrocities and spice imports. Throughout her historical analysis of the emerging Dutch empire, Hochstrasser also makes abundant use of visual primary sources, contemporary illustrations in travel books or histories (e.g. Lodewyckszoon, 1596; Nieuhof, 1670, 1682). In this respect, her book dovetails nicely with the work of social historians.

Floris van Schooten, *Breakfast with Butter and Domestic Fruits*, formerly collection Dr H Nordlund, Gothenburg, Sweden. From *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age* by Julie Berger Hochstrasser.

After laying out the history of commodities and tracking their representations in Dutch paintings, Hochstrasser moves ambitiously to her evaluation of this visual culture in a second section, ambitious titled 'The language of commodities'. Here perhaps her reach exceeds her grasp, but the ambition of the book consists of her desire to make the objects speak their cultural meaning.

Ambivalence concerning the foreign emerges clearly from her chosen passages, notably Beverwyck on sugar and spices. On the one hand, the resourceful Netherlands has transcended her geographical limitations, yet on the other these food treasures offer temptations and indulgences, whereas the nation could readily remain self-sufficient. Luxury ruined the Roman Empire, and the Dutch should be mindful of the lessons of history.

Hochstrasser also puts great stock in the significance of newspaper reports about shipments as indicators of the dangers faced from storms and piracy (especially by the English). Most of the objects in these reports provide the *pronk* of luxury still-lifes, and Hochstrasser notes both the pride of attaining these treasures as well as the suppressed hidden social costs that she takes pains to illuminate. The reader is left to wonder, however, whether Dutch national pride in all this accumulation is misplaced, whether Marx's focused critique of Holland as the epitome of early capitalism should be a relevant outlook, either for the seventeenth century or today. For wider cultural values of the day, the interested reader should consult the new book by Anne Goldgar (University of Amsterdam Press, 2007) about the Dutch phenomenon mythologised as 'Tulipmania', which was also the spur to a crisis of confidence in old social and economic systems.

In the end, Hochstrasser seems more interested in her conclusions to raise Marxist as well as post-colonial critiques of the Dutch colonial commerce. While these cultural studies critiques surely

prompted these fascinating material(ist) discoveries on her part, they also lead to a departure from disinterested historical analysis and a heavy overlay of current postmodern theorising in place of the contemporary Dutch views that prompted the proliferation of these very still-life paintings. In the final analysis, while our understanding of this genre and its implied values is greatly enhanced and rendered far more complex, the original cultural purposes of such pictures ultimately become more obscure.

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JAPONISME: THE JAPANESE INFLUENCE ON WESTERN ART SINCE 1858

SIEGFRIED WICHMANN

Thames & Hudson 2007 £29.95 $49.95 (P)
423 pp. 243 col/862 mono illus
ISBN 0-500-28163-7

In the year 1888, the renowned doyen of artistic taste and pioneer in the field of Japonisme, Edmond de Goncourt, complained he was incapable of writing a book on Japanese art that would do justice to the subject. After 200 years of limited trade and diplomatic links, the European rediscovery of Japan in the mid-nineteenth century was a revelation, and the task of assessing the forceful enthusiasm of response that this encounter generated demands great breadth of vision. The dissemination of Japanese artworks had a decisive impact on the development of modern art, with Japanese prints in particular allowing artists such as Gauguin and Toulouse Lautrec to abandon the linear perspective and tonal modelling demanded by outmoded academic painting in favour of using expressive forms, vibrant colour, and dynamic points of view. This moment of confrontation between Eastern and Western cultures, and between established and emergent approaches to problems of form, has understandably generated a large and wide ranging variety of scholarship. In a thoroughly researched area, Siegfried Wichmann's *Japonisme* is one of the most comprehensive and accessible volumes available on this topic.

Japonisme, loosely defined as the influence of Japanese art on Western artists, is not a style, a period, or a movement, making it a difficult subject to define. Wichmann's volume includes art works produced in Asia, America and Europe over a large historical time frame, with Monet, Beardsley, and Pollock being just a few of the diverse artists discussed. Wichmann's awareness of the varied nature of the topic not only dictates the organisation of his text but is integral to its success.

The volume opens with a concise historical survey of the entry of Japanese art into Europe. The historical and commercial detail given here establishes a rich sense of context often lacking in accounts that discuss Japonisme strictly in terms of stylistic problems, and explains the role of visionary dealers such as Samuel Bing, whose gallery was frequented by the Van Gogh brothers, in shaping artistic taste.

Rather than continuing with this narrative history of Japonsime, however, Wichmann instead divides the book into chapters detailing specific techniques and themes, including calligraphy, metalwork and interior design, advancing on discussions of Japonisme that give priority to the woodcut print. The encyclopaedic range of media discussed not only gives a sense of the pervasive nature of Japanese influence, but is also in itself influenced by Japanese artistic concepts, where boundaries between 'fine' and 'applied' arts are muted. This thematic organisation is not without difficulties. Vincent Van Gogh's *oeuvre*, for example, is divided, with paintings and ink drawings being discussed in separate sections of the book. The advantages of the thematic framework do, however, outweigh any navigational problems. It is innovative in allowing modern Western artworks and their premodern Japanese prototypes to be easily compared, both visually and conceptually.

Western artists approached Japan with an omnivorous curiosity, and the diversity of techniques examined allows Wichmann to demonstrate how Japanese influence diffused across media, as in the case of Monet's *La Japonaise*, which was a painted response to textile designs. The nature of Japonisme requires the author to offer incisive comparative analysis of Japanese and Western artefacts, and Wichmann's title sets the standard for the use of juxtaposition as a means of constructing visual argument. The generous number of sumptuous illustrations make this book a powerful combination of insightful scholarly text and lavish visual images that is both engaging and accessible.

The high proportion of Japanese (and in some instances Chinese) artworks reproduced demonstrates a sensitivity to Japanese art unusual in works on Japonisme, which are necessarily written from the perspective of Western art history. At times, Wichmann's discussion of Japanese art is overly dependent on assumption and convention. There is some irony in his discussion of the impact of Hokusai's *Great Wave* on European artists without acknowledgement that Hokusai's image was itself influenced by Netherlandish seascapes. For these reasons, the reproductions and commentaries on Japanese production are of limited interest to scholars of Japanese art, since it was never Wichmann's intention to offer insights on this subject. Scholars and students of Western modernism will, however, find that this volume is unique in providing a sufficient knowledge of Japanese models to enable improved understanding of the assimilation of Japanese ideas in the Western art world.

Wichmann argues that contact with Japan transformed Western art, and that this influence was not a quickly passing novelty, but endured into the late twentieth century. Amongst the later works discussed by Wichmann are Mark Tobey's paintings of the 1970s, which share the characteristic dynamism and autonomy of gesture of Eastern calligraphy. Wichmann's book was first published in 1980 but, despite having been reissued several times, the text remains largely faithful to the original. The current edition is the second paperback version to be published, and develops little from the previous paperback issue of 1999. The lack of updating poses the question of whether Wichmann's work could be extended. Increasing awareness of Japanese art in the West, particularly in connection with mass cultural forms such as cinema and animation, certainly suggests that 'Japonisme' continues to be a source of curiosity. This is not to say that Wichmann's text is outdated, and his insights undeniably remain valuable. A preliminary section providing an historiographic analysis of Japonisme as a trend in Western taste and intellectual life is an excellent inclusion that continues to be highly useful for scholars and students. The selection, presentation, and range of examples reproduced make this book equally appealing to a non-specialist audience. Wichmann's work continues to

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Julie Berger Hochstrasser. *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age*.

Da tempo ormai la prospettiva globale è parte integrante degli studi storici, comprese le recenti ricerche accademiche sul cibo e gli studi divulgativi sulle materie prime, dal sale al merluzzo, dal caffè ai tulipani. In Olanda, recenti studi sulla Compagnia Olandese delle Indie Orientali (VOC) e sulle origini dell'espansione coloniale olandese nel XVII secolo hanno aumentato la conoscenza degli olandesi in Asia. Ora la storia dell'arte si unisce efficacemente a questo importante dibattito con un nuovo importante studio che si occupa tanto del “commercio” nel suo titolo quanto dello studio tradizionale della “natura morta”.
Julie Hochstrasser offre una delle prime indagini serie sui beni materiali raffigurati sui tavoli nei dipinti olandesi di nature morte, che documentano le prime fasi di una società consumistica emergente – e l'orgoglio nazionale che ne derivava – che rimane un segno distintivo della modernità. Piuttosto che preoccuparsi dei termini o delle categorie contemporanei per l'arte che oggi raggruppiamo sotto la categoria di genere “natura morta”, come “opera sulla colazione” o “natura morta di lusso” (*pronkstilleven*), l'autrice prende in considerazione gli oggetti stessi e le loro origini. I primi capitoli esaminano le origini e le stime di questi vari prodotti: la produzione interna olandese, i prodotti di base europei più diffusi (come il grano baltico, ma anche i limoni e il vino) e le importazioni esotiche, sia dalle Americhe (sale, tabacco, zucchero) che dalla Compagnia Olandese delle Indie Orientali (pepe e porcellane cinesi) attraverso l'Oceano Indiano.
Nella prefazione, l'autrice esprime chiaramente la sua coscienza sociale e sottolinea gli obiettivi del suo libro: decentrare l'Europa come unico punto di riferimento, anche quando si studia una grande potenza economica europea, e portare alla luce storie nascoste legate al potere imperiale, in particolare la schiavitù (argomento particolarmente attuale in questo anno dell'anniversario dell'abolizione della tratta degli schiavi dalla Gran Bretagna).
La stessa Olanda figura inizialmente come fonte di alcuni prodotti di consumo presenti nelle nature morte, in particolare formaggio, aringhe e birra. L'attenta ricerca di Hochstrasser presenta anche un ricco materiale di riferimento contemporaneo, tra cui resoconti delle proprietà salutari dei prodotti locali avanzati da scrittori contemporanei, in particolare il Tesoro della salute (1636, Appendice I) di Johan van Beverwyck. Gli storici dell'arte possono essere grati solo per questo materiale di prima mano, perché le precedenti interpretazioni di articoli come il tabacco o l'alcol hanno spesso considerato tali sostanze come oggetto di abuso in un contesto di “deviazione sociale”, mentre il loro ruolo centrale nelle nature morte olandesi suggerisce anche un'utilità più benigna. Il suo lavoro chiarisce il legame tra porcellane e arance (ancora chiamate “mele cinesi” nell'olandese moderno), nonché l'intricata connessione tra schiavitù e produzione di zucchero o tra atrocità coloniali e importazioni di spezie. Nella sua analisi storica dell'impero olandese emergente, Hochstrasser fa anche ampio uso di fonti primarie visive, illustrazioni

contemporanee in libri di viaggio o di storia (ad esempio Lodewyckszoon, 1596; Nieuhof, 1670, 1682). A questo proposito, il suo libro si integra perfettamente con il lavoro degli storici sociali.
Dopo aver tracciato la storia delle merci e averne seguito le rappresentazioni nella pittura olandese, Hochstrasser passa con ambizione alla valutazione di questa cultura visiva in una seconda sezione, dal titolo ambizioso “Il linguaggio delle merci”. Qui forse la sua portata supera la sua competenza, ma l’ambizione del libro consiste nel suo desiderio di far parlare gli oggetti del loro significato culturale.
L'ambivalenza nei confronti dello straniero emerge chiaramente dai passaggi scelti, in particolare quello di Beverwyck sullo zucchero e le spezie. Da un lato, i Paesi Bassi, ricchi di risorse, hanno superato i propri limiti geografici, ma dall'altro questi tesori alimentari offrono tentazioni e gratificazioni, mentre la nazione potrebbe facilmente rimanere autosufficiente. Il lusso ha rovinato l'Impero Romano e gli olandesi dovrebbero tenere a mente le lezioni della storia.
Hochstrasser attribuisce inoltre grande importanza ai resoconti giornalistici sulle spedizioni come indicatori dei pericoli rappresentati dalle tempeste e dalla pirateria (soprattutto inglese). La maggior parte degli oggetti citati in questi articoli costituiscono delle nature morte di lusso, e Hochstrasser sottolinea sia l'orgoglio di aver acquisito questi tesori sia i costi sociali nascosti e occultati che lei si sforza di mettere in luce. Il lettore è tuttavia portato a chiedersi se l'orgoglio nazionale olandese per tutto questo accumulo sia fuori luogo, se la critica mirata di Marx all'Olanda come epitome del primo capitalismo debba essere considerata una visione pertinente, sia per il XVII secolo che per i giorni nostri. Per i valori culturali più ampi dell'epoca, il lettore interessato dovrebbe consultare il nuovo libro di Anne Goldgar (University of Amsterdam Press, 2007) sul fenomeno olandese mitizzato come “Tulipomania”, che fu anche lo stimolo di una crisi di fiducia nei vecchi sistemi sociali ed economici.
Alla fine, Hochstrasser sembra più interessata alle sue conclusioni per sollevare critiche marxiste e postcoloniali al commercio coloniale olandese. Sebbene queste critiche degli studi culturali abbiano sicuramente stimolato le sue affascinanti scoperte materiali (materialiste), esse hanno anche portato ad un allontanamento dall'analisi storica disinteressata e ad una forte sovrapposizione delle attuali teorie postmoderne al posto delle opinioni olandesi contemporanee che hanno stimolato la proliferazione di questi dipinti di nature morte. In ultima analisi, mentre la nostra comprensione di questo genere e dei valori che esso implica è notevolmente migliorata e resa molto più complessa, gli scopi culturali originari di tali immagini finiscono per diventare più oscuri.

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