



Emanuel de Witte, *Interior with a Woman Playing the Virginals* (c. 1660)

*Domesticity, privacy, comfort, the concept of the home and of the family: these are, literally, principal achievements of the Bourgeois Age.*

—JOHN LUKACS

THE BOURGEOIS INTERIOR

The appearance of intimacy and privacy in homes in Paris and London, and soon after even in such out-of-the-way places as Oslo, was an unwitting, almost unconscious, reaction to the changing conditions of urban life, and it appeared to be more a question of popular attitudes than of anything else. It is difficult to trace the evolution of something so amorphous, and it would be dangerous to claim that there was a single place where the modern idea of the family home first entered the human consciousness. There was, after all, no identifiable moment of discovery, no individual inventor who can be credited with the intuition, no theory or treatise on the subject. There was one place, however, where the seventeenth-century domestic interior evolved in a way that was arguably unique, and that can be described as having been, at the very least, exemplary.

The United Provinces of the Netherlands was a brand-new state, formed in 1609 after thirty years of rebellion against Spain. It was among the smallest countries in Europe, with a population one-quarter that of Spain, one-eighth that of France, and with a landmass smaller than Switzerland's. It had few natural resources—no mines, no forests—and what little land there was needed constant protection from the sea. 51

But this “low” country surprisingly quickly established itself as a major power. In a short time it became the most advanced shipbuilding nation in the world and developed large naval, fishing, and merchant fleets. Its explorers founded colonies in Africa and Asia, as well as in America. The Netherlands introduced many financial innovations that made it a major economic force—and Amsterdam became the world center for international finance. Its manufacturing towns grew so quickly that by the middle of the century the Netherlands had supplanted France as the leading industrial nation of the world.<sup>1</sup> Its universities were among the best in Europe; its tolerant political and religious climate offered a home for émigré thinkers such as Spinoza, Descartes, and John Locke. This fecund country produced not just venture capitalists and the speculative tulip trade, but also Rembrandt and Vermeer; it devised not only the first recorded war game, but also the first microscope; it invested not only in heavily armed East Indiamen but also in beautiful towns. All this occurred during a brief historical moment—barely a human lifetime—which lasted from 1609 until roughly the 1660s, and which the Dutch call their “golden age.”

These unlikely achievements were the result of several different factors, such as the Netherlands’ advantageous location in European maritime trade, as well as the defensibility of its national borders, but it was in great measure a result of the peculiar character of the Dutch social fabric, which was different from that of the rest of Europe. The Dutch were primarily merchants and landowners. Unlike England, the Netherlands lacked a landless peasantry (most Dutch farmers owned their land); unlike France, it had no powerful aristocracy (the nobility, decimated by the wars for independence, was small and no longer wealthy); unlike Spain, it had no king (the head of state, or *stadhouder*, was a national symbol, but with limited real power). This republic—the first in Europe—was a loose confederation ruled by a States General,

which consisted of representatives of the seven sovereign provinces, chosen from the patrician upper middle class.

The pattern of human settlements was also markedly different than elsewhere. Already in 1500, the Low Countries (which then included Brabant, or Belgium) had numbered more than 200 fortified towns and 150 large villages.<sup>2</sup> By the seventeenth century, most of the population in its three most powerful provinces—Holland, Zeeland, and Utrecht—lived in towns. Amsterdam became a major city of Europe, Rotterdam was a growing port, and Leiden was an important manufacturing and university town. However, it was not its major cities but its many smaller towns that distinguished the Netherlands; there were more medium-sized towns than in much larger countries, such as France, England, or Germany.<sup>3</sup> The eighteen largest towns had one vote each in the assembly of the provincial states, which indicated their importance and their independence. In short, at a time when the other states of Europe remained primarily rural (even in urbanized Italy, most of the people were still peasants), the Netherlands was rapidly becoming a nation of townspeople. Burghers by historical tradition, the Dutch were bourgeois by inclination.<sup>4</sup>

The bourgeois nature of Dutch society in the seventeenth century needs some explanation. To say that it was “bourgeois” does not mean that it consisted exclusively of a middle class. There were farmers (*boers*), seamen, and, in manufacturing towns such as Leiden, factory workers. The last-named, especially, did not share in the prosperity of that time, and their living conditions were as miserable as in other countries. There was also, as in all European cities, an urban rabble (*grauw*), composed of paupers and criminals, the unemployed and the unemployable, itinerant beggars and tramps. However, the middle class predominated, and was broad enough to encompass the international financier as well as the shopkeeper. The former did not, of course, identify, or even associate with the latter, even if, as was often the case, his

economic ascent was recent, for Dutch society was not static, and social position was defined largely by income. Bourgeois also was the patrician elite—a ruling class—which provided the magistrates and burgomasters who governed the towns, and through them the country. By European standards, this was a greatly expanded democracy, and this “social dictatorship of the merchant class,” as one historian called it, created the first bourgeois state.

Everyday life in the Netherlands in the seventeenth century reflected the traditional bourgeois virtues—an unruffled moderation, an admiration for hard work, and a financial prudence bordering on parsimony. Thrift evolved naturally in a society of merchants and traders who, moreover, lived in a country which required a constant communal investment in canals, dikes, sluices, and windmills to keep the North Sea at bay. They were also a simple people, less passionate than the Latins of southern Europe, less sentimental than their German neighbors, less intellectual than the French. The Dutch historian Huizinga claimed that the flat, restful landscape of polders and canals, which lacked dramatic features such as mountains or valleys, encouraged the simplicity of the Dutch character.<sup>5</sup> Equally important was religion. Although only about a third of the Dutch were Calvinists, this became the state religion and exercised a major influence on everyday life, contributing a sense of sobriety and restraint to Dutch society.

All these circumstances produced a people who admired saving, frowned on conspicuous spending, and naturally evolved conservative manners. The simplicity of the Dutch bourgeois expressed itself in many ways. The dress of a Dutch male, for instance, was plain. The doublet and trousers were the seventeenth-century equivalent of the modern businessman's three-piece suit, and like it they were unaffected by fashion; the quality of the cloth might vary but the style remained unchanged for generations. The favorite colors were dark:

black, violet, or brown. The officials of the clothmakers' guild, in Rembrandt's famous group portrait, were prosperous (as their lace collars and amply cut cassocks indicate) but somber to the point of drabness. Their wives dressed with similar moderation, and neither exhibited the nervous flamboyance and constantly changing chic that was so characteristic of the French bourgeoisie. So circumspect were the Dutch that in paintings of the period it is not always easy to distinguish between an official and his clerk, between a mistress and her servant.

The same simplicity and thrift were apparent in Dutch houses, which lacked the architectural pretension of townhouses in London or Paris, and which were built of brick and wood instead of stone. These materials were used for their light weight, since the boggy soil of the Low Countries frequently required pile foundations, the cost of which could be reduced if the foundations carried less weight. Brick does not lend itself to elaborate decoration—unlike stone, it cannot be carved, and unlike cement plaster, it cannot be formed into moldings and reliefs. Consequently, Dutch buildings were plain, only occasionally relieved by stonework at the corners and around the doors and windows. The material was appreciated mainly for its pleasant texture; undoubtedly its economy also appealed to the practical-minded Dutch, who used it even for their public buildings.

The expense of building canals and pilings dictated that street frontages be reduced as much as possible; as a result, the building plots in Dutch towns were extremely narrow, sometimes only one room wide. The houses were built adjacent to each other in a row, usually sharing common walls. The roofs were covered in red clay tiles. Their gable ends, which were often stepped, faced the street and produced the characteristic silhouettes for which Dutch towns became famous. At the top of the gable was a wooden bracket and hook, used for hauling furniture and other goods to the upper

floors. The interior of the medieval Dutch house consisted of a "front room" (where commercial activities took place) and a "back room" (where the household cooked, ate, and slept). In front of the house, and slightly raised above the level of the street, was a wide verandah-like *stoep*, or stoop, with benches, sometimes protected with a wooden canopy. Here the family sat in the evenings and socialized with passersby. Below the house was a shallow cellar, its floor never lower than the water level of the adjacent canal. As families became more prosperous, these low houses were extended in the only direction possible—up. Two, and sometimes three, floors were added.

The original ground floors of Dutch houses were often high, so that the first additional space consisted of a gallery or loft, which was reached by a ladderlike stair. As the house grew, this pattern was continued, so that often no two rooms were on the same level, and all were connected by steep, narrow staircases. Initially, these rooms, with the exception of the kitchen, did not have special functions. By midcentury, however, the subdivision of the house into day and night uses, and into formal and informal areas, had begun. The upper floors of the house began to be treated as formal rooms, reserved for special occasions. The second-floor room facing the street was turned into a parlor, the old front room became a kind of living room, and other rooms began to be used exclusively for sleeping. As in the rest of Europe there were no bathrooms, and privies were a rarity.\* The Dutch were a seafaring people, and there was something shipshape about

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\* One reason that privies were rare was that most Dutch towns were built on marshy land, and privy pits and cesspools filled with water and ceased to function. The usual alternative was the chamber pot, which was emptied into the canal. Unlike Venice, however, Dutch towns had no sea tide to remove these wastes, with the unfortunate consequence that these pretty towns probably had an unbearable odor. There were occasional efforts to remedy the situation. Canals were periodically dredged, and in some towns

these compact interiors, with the tarred brick walls (to protect them against the humidity) and painted woodwork, the steep, narrow stairs, and the rooms as small as ships' cabins. The atmosphere could best be described as snug—a word which is coincidentally both of nautical and of Dutch origin.

Building on pilings on reclaimed land had its drawbacks, but it also produced an unexpected benefit for the occupants. Since the shared side walls of these houses carried all the weight of the roof and the floors, the external cross-walls served no structural function, and, given the high cost of foundations, there was an advantage to making them as light as possible. To accomplish this, the builders of Dutch houses pierced the façades with many and large windows, whose function may have been to save weight, but which also allowed light to penetrate far into the deep, narrow interiors. In the days before gaslight, this was important. Paintings of Dutch houses in daytime show bright, sunlit rooms whose cheerfulness was in contrast to the dark interiors that were typical in other countries. Before the seventeenth century, the upper parts of Dutch windows had fixed glass, and only the lower portions, which were solid wood, were openable; later these too were glazed. The light coming through these windows was controlled by shutters, and by a new device—window curtains—which also provided privacy from the street. As these openings became larger, they became more awkward to open the windows in the conventional way, and the Dutch invented a new type of window, the sash or double-hung window, which could be conveniently opened without sticking into the room. Like the two-part Dutch door, the sash window was soon copied in England and France.

New inventions such as the sash window were not typical;

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night soil was collected from the houses in wooden containers and barged out to the countryside for the benefit of the farmers, a practice that was medieval in origin but continued in some towns until the 1950s.\*

Dutch houses in the seventeenth century were hardly bristling with innovation, and in fact retained many medieval features. This mixing of the old and new was a characteristic feature of Dutch society. At the same time as it pioneered new political forms of organization, it combined these with traditional institutions such as guilds and self-governing towns; these social revolutionaries (although they would have hardly considered themselves that) dressed like their grandfathers, and in many ways lived like them as well. Their houses continued to be built out of wood and brick. In the traditional way, signs indicated the owner's profession—scissors for the tailor, an oven for the baker. The gabled façades of private houses were topped off with a figurative sculpture with literary or biblical connotations. The Dutch loved allegories, and in some houses stone tablets, inscribed with a suitable epigraph, were set into the wall. The small houses with their colorful signs had a medieval, toylike charm. Indeed, they, and their owners, were often described as “old-fashioned.”

Unfortunately, the thermal charms of these houses were also medieval. (I once spent a week in January in a seventeenth-century house in Leiden. In this historically protected neighborhood the old house was without insulation, double glazing, or central heating; it was a chillingly authentic experience.) The Dutch climate is not a particularly severe one, but the situation of the country makes for damp winters. In the absence of firewood (Holland has few forests) the main heating fuel in the seventeenth century was peat, which can be burned effectively but requires special stoves. These were unknown at that time and instead, to promote combustion, the peat was piled in tall, open stacks on the fire grate inside the fireplace, or was burned in so-called fire pots; this got rid of the foul-smelling smoke, but unfortunately produced little heat.<sup>7</sup> The only way to achieve some comfort under such circumstances was to wear many clothes, which, as amused visitors noted, is exactly what the Dutch did. Men wore half

a dozen waistcoats, several pairs of trousers, and heavy cloaks; their wives wore as many as six petticoats under their skirts. The effect was hardly flattering to the figure and at least partially explains the apparently dumpy physiques of the burghers and their wives in contemporary paintings.

These houses were “small houses,” literally as well as figuratively. They did not need to be large, because they contained few people; the average number of people per house in most Dutch towns was not more than four or five, compared to as many as twenty-five in a city such as Paris. Why was this? For one thing, there were no tenants, for the Dutch preferred, and were prosperous enough, to afford the luxury of owning their own homes, however small. The house had ceased to be a place of work, and as many artisans became well-to-do merchants or *rentiers*, they built separate establishments for their businesses, and employees and apprentices had to provide their own lodgings. Nor were there as many servants as in other countries, for Dutch society discouraged the hiring of servants and imposed special taxes on those who employed domestic help.<sup>8</sup> Individual independence was more highly prized than elsewhere, and, equally importantly, it could be afforded. As a result, most homes in the Netherlands housed a single couple and their children. This brought about another change. The publicness that had characterized the “big house” was replaced by a more sedate—and more private—home life.

The emergence of the family home reflected the growing importance of the family in Dutch society. The glue that cemented this unit was the presence of children. The mother raised her own children—there were no nurses. Young children attended infant school at the age of three, and then primary school for four years. The Netherlands had, it is generally agreed, the highest level of literacy in Europe, and even secondary education was not uncommon. Most children lived at home until they were married, and the relations be-

tween Dutch parents and their children were characterized by affection, rather than by discipline. Foreign visitors considered this permissiveness to be a dangerous habit. Given the excessive indulgence with which parents treated their children, one observed, "it is surprising that there is not more disorder than there is."<sup>9</sup> For the Frenchman who wrote this, children were small and unruly, but nevertheless adults; the idea of childhood did not yet exist for him. The historian Philippe Ariès has described how the substitution of school for apprenticeship throughout Europe reflected a rapprochement between parents and family, and between the concept of family and the concept of childhood.<sup>10</sup> This is precisely what happened in the Netherlands, where the family centered itself on the child and family life centered itself on the home, only in the Dutch home it occurred about a hundred years earlier than elsewhere.<sup>11</sup>

It was the opinion of more than one contemporary visitor that the Dutch prized three things above all else: first their children, second their homes, and third their gardens.<sup>12</sup> In these narrow houses, built directly on the street and sharing their side walls with their neighbors, the garden was an important space, all the more so because in the mild climate it was used most of the year. Within the restricted area available, there evolved a particularly formal type of landscaping, as artificial, in its own way, as the small urban gardens of the Japanese. The precisely clipped hedges, geometrically shaped box trees, and colored gravel walks echoed the orderliness of the interiors. The Dutch garden was a further indication of the transition from the communal big house to the individual family home. The typical European townhouse of this period, whether in Paris or in Oslo, was built around a courtyard which was essentially public in nature. The secluded back garden of the Dutch house was different—it was private.

While Dutch houses and gardens may have been private, they nevertheless contributed to the overall appearance of the towns. Because of the canals, which were built with tree-lined roadways on both sides, the spaces between the houses were the width of boulevards (this was two hundred years before Baron Haussmann built the Champs-Élysées). Because of the wide use of brick and a building style that was imitative rather than inventive, Dutch towns had a pleasant uniformity. This prompted the Danish historian Steen Eiler Rasmussen to write that whereas the French and the Italians created impressive palaces, the Dutch created incomparable towns.<sup>13</sup>

The rapid, and, as it seemed to many, improbable prosperity of the Netherlands—as that of Japan today—aroused much interest in other countries. Sir William Temple, who was the English ambassador at The Hague from 1668 to 1670 and knew the country well, wrote a widely read book attempting to explain this curious phenomenon to his countrymen. The fourth chapter, entitled "Of Their People and Dispositions," concluded: "Holland is a Countrey where the Earth is better than the Air, and Profit more in request than Honour; Where there is more Sense than Wit; More good Nature than good Humor; And more Wealth than Pleasure; Where a man would chuse rather to travel, than to live. . . ." Harsh words, although intended, perhaps, for a jingoistic audience, since later in life their author gave up the chance to be Secretary of State in favor of returning to his old job in The Hague. Despite what he perceived as penny-pinching cheerlessness in the Dutch character, Temple did point out that in one area, at least, the Dutch did not hold back in their expenditures: they were inclined to invest all their surplus income in "the Fabrick, Adornment, or Furniture of their Houses."<sup>14</sup>

The Dutch loved their homes. They shared this old Anglo-Saxon word—*ham*, *hejm* in Dutch—with the other peoples

of northern Europe.\* “Home” brought together the meanings of house and of household, of dwelling and of refuge, of ownership and of affection. “Home” meant the house, but also everything that was in it and around it, as well as the people, and the sense of satisfaction and contentment that all these conveyed. You could walk out of the house, but you always returned home. The Dutch affection for their homes was expressed in a singular practice: they had elaborate scale models built of their houses. These replicas are sometimes—inaccurately—referred to as dollhouses. Their function was more like that of ship models, not playthings but miniature memorials, records of dearly beloved objects. They were built like cupboards which did not represent the exterior appearance of the house. But when the doors were opened the entire interior was magically revealed, not only the rooms—complete with wall coverings and furnishings—but even paintings, utensils, and china figurines.

The furniture and adornment of a seventeenth-century Dutch home were meant, although in a typically restrained way, to convey the wealth of its owner. There were still benches and stools, especially in the homes of the less prosperous, but, as in England and France, the chair had become the most common sitting device. It was almost always without arms, padded, and upholstered in velvet and other rich materials, usually attached to the frame with copper nails. Tables, like chairs, were of oak or walnut and had elegantly turned legs. Curttained four-poster beds were similarly constructed, but less common than in England or France; instead, the Dutch slept in beds that were built into the wall. Such beds, of medieval

\* This wonderful word, “home,” which connotes a physical “place” but also has the more abstract sense of a “state of being,” has no equivalent in the Latin or Slavic European languages. German, Danish, Swedish, Icelandic, Dutch, and English all have similar sounding words for “home,” all derived from the Old Norse “heima.”

origin, were set into an alcove, completely enclosed on three sides, and the opening was screened with a curtain or solid shutters. The most important piece of bourgeois furniture was the cupboard, which the Dutch borrowed from Germany, and which replaced the horizontal chest as the means of storage. There were usually two such cupboards, often ornamented with inlays of precious wood, one for the linens and another for tableware. For storing and displaying the latter there were also glass-fronted credenzas, descendants of the medieval plate cupboards, which held silver and crystal, Delft porcelain and oriental china.\*

The type of furniture in a Dutch house was similar to that found in a Parisian bourgeois home; the difference was in the effect. The French interior was crowded and frenetic, the many pieces of furniture jostling each other in rooms whose papered walls were illustrated with scenic landscapes and where all surfaces were embroidered, gilded, or decorated. Dutch decor, by comparison, was sparse. Furniture was to be admired, but it was also meant to be used, and it was never so crowded as to detract from the sense of space that was produced by the room and by the light within it. The walls were rarely papered or covered, although they were adorned with paintings, mirrors, and maps—the last-named a uniquely Dutch practice. The effect was far from severe, and was not intended to be. These rooms, with one or two chairs under a window, or a bench beside the door, were intensely human, and were directed to private use, rather than

\* Chinese porcelain was evidence of the Netherlands’ international trade and its growing colonial empire. It is also a reminder that the Dutch frequently played the role of middlemen of culture, as well as of trade.<sup>15</sup> They were the first Europeans to use Turkish carpets, for instance, occasionally on the floor, but more frequently as a table covering. It was the Dutch, also, through their East India Company, who introduced Europe to japanned and lacquered finishing from the Orient, to the arts of inlaying and veneering furniture from Asia, and, not the least, to tea-drinking.

to entertaining and socializing. They exhibited an intimacy that is inadequately described by words such as "serene" or "peaceful."

As every homemaker knows, the less furniture there is, the easier it is to keep a room clean, and this too may have had something to do with the relative sparseness of the Dutch interior, for these houses were spotlessly, immaculately, unbelievably clean. The well-scrubbed Dutch stoop is famous and has come to serve as an example of public exhibition and bourgeois pretentiousness. Public it certainly was—not only the stoop but the entire road pavement in front of the house was washed and sanded by the householder—but it was no pretense; the interiors of Dutch houses were equally scrubbed and scoured. Sand was scattered on the floor, recalling the medieval practice of covering floors in rushes. Pots were shined, woodwork varnished, brickwork tarred. This was all taken seriously by the Dutch, and produced some curious customs which never failed to elicit comment from foreigners. A German visitor to Delft in 1665 wrote that "in many houses, as in the holy places of the heathens, it is not permissible to ascend the stairs or set foot in a room without first removing one's shoes."<sup>16</sup> Jean-Nicolas de Parival, a French traveler, observed the same thing, adding that frequently straw slippers were put on over one's shoes.<sup>17</sup>

This gives the impression that the streets of Dutch towns were unkempt; instead the opposite was true. Save for those in the oldest neighborhoods, where the poor lived, the streets were paved in brick, and included sidewalks for pedestrians. Whereas in London and Paris the public street was unbearable—a combination of open sewer and garbage dump—in Dutch towns this waste material was disposed of in the canals, leaving the street relatively clean. Moreover, since it was the custom for each household to wash the street in front of its house, these streets were generally as well scrubbed as the

stoops. If the streets were so clean, certainly cleaner than elsewhere in Europe, how to explain this collective obsession with cleanliness inside the home? Was it the product of Calvinism (stoops in Calvinist Scotland were equally scoured), or merely of bourgeois decorum? Or was this homely virtue the result of the simplicity of the Dutch spirit, a delight in the neat and the orderly? \* Huizinga suggested the latter, adding that it was made possible by the easy availability of water, the dustless marine atmosphere of the Netherlands, and the tradition of cheese-making, an activity requiring special attention to cleanliness.<sup>18</sup> This sounds too deterministic, and in any case, cheese-making was hardly confined to the Netherlands. Another explanation is that the care lavished on their homes by the Dutch was a kind of preventive maintenance. That, at least, was Temple's suggestion: "The same moisture of Air makes all Metals apt to rust, and Wood to mould; which forces them by continual pains of rubbing and scouring, to seek a prevention or cure: This makes the brightness and cleanness that seems affected in their Houses, and is call'd natural to them, by people who think no further."<sup>19</sup>

The importance that the Dutch attached to domestic cleanliness is all the more striking since we know that in their personal habits the Dutch were not especially clean; there is plenty of evidence that they were considered, even by the insalubrious standards of the seventeenth century, to be dirty.<sup>20</sup> "They keep their houses cleaner than their bodies," wrote an English visitor.<sup>21</sup> The Dutch house did not contain a room for bathing, for instance, and public baths were almost unknown. Bathing was further discouraged by the multiple layers of clothing that both men and women wore in the damp winters.

Temple remarked on the unhealthy climate and situation

\* The Dutch word for clean, *schoon*, also expresses beauty and purity.



of the Netherlands. Although the Dutch originated modern medicine, they were unable to control the many infectious diseases that struck almost every Dutch town during the seventeenth century. The generally low level of public health was indicated by the series of annual epidemics that ravaged Amsterdam for six years during the 1620s, reducing the population by thirty-five thousand. Leiden lost more than a third of its forty thousand citizens in six months of 1635.

It is precisely because Holland's scrubbed floors and polished brasswork did not reflect a profound understanding of health or hygiene that they are significant. The cleanliness of the Dutch interior was not simply a part of the national character, nor a response determined by external causes, but evidence of something much more important. When visitors were required to take off their shoes or put on slippers, it was not immediately on entering the house—the lower floor was still considered to be a part of the public street—but on going upstairs. That was where the public realm stopped and the home began. This boundary was a new idea, and the order and tidiness of the household were evidence neither of fastidiousness nor of a particular cleanliness, but instead of a desire to define the home as a separate, special place.

That we are able to know so much about the appearance of Dutch homes is thanks to two happy accidents: the predominance of painting in seventeenth-century Holland, and the popularity of domestic scenes as a subject of these paintings. The Dutch loved paintings. The richest and the most humble person bought them and hung them in their homes. This was partly as an investment, but also for their own pleasure. Paintings could be found not only in parlors and front rooms but also in taverns, offices, and workplaces and behind shop counters. The bourgeois public supported many painters who,

like furniture makers or other craftsmen, were organized in guilds. These Dutch painters diligently worked their way up in their profession, beginning at the age of fourteen as apprentices, then as journeymen assistants, until after six years they could apply for membership in the guild and become independent "masters," at which point they were permitted to sell paintings under their own names.

Although the market for paintings was large, the supply was as well, and few Dutch painters became wealthy. Portraits were painted on commission, but much painting was done on speculation and sold through dealers. The public desired paintings of suitable subjects, whose artistry they could admire and understand. The technically skilled painters, with a direct, uncomplicated approach to painting, and without the self-consciousness of later artists, were happy to oblige. As a result, seventeenth-century Dutch paintings serve not only as art, but also as an unusually accurate representation of the time.

Given the affection of the Dutch for their neat, well-kept houses, it was not surprising that in addition to biblical subjects and family portraits, there developed a genre of painting that dealt with the home itself. To recall the work of an American illustrator such as Norman Rockwell conveys a little of their artistry, but it does give a sense of a type of painting that appealed to a home-loving public. Pieter de Hooch painted wonderful scenes of domestic life, as also did Jan Steen and Gabriel Metsu. Less than forty paintings remain by the great Jan Vermeer, and almost all of them are set within the home. But it was Emanuel de Witte, who specialized in views of church interiors, another popular genre, who painted a domestic scene that has come to epitomize the seventeenth-century Dutch interior. This little masterpiece, painted around 1660, shows a series of rooms opening off each other, bathed in sunlight that falls through the large leaded win-

dows.\* Judging from the way that the light passes into all three rooms and the hint of trees visible through the windows, this house is probably on the outskirts of the town. The central figure in the painting, and the one from which it gets its name, is a young woman playing the virginals, a precursor to the spinet, that was popular in Holland at that time.

Like many Dutch painters, de Witte intended his picture to tell a story. On the surface this is an idyllic, peaceful scene. It is early in the day—that is implied by the low angle of the sun, and by the maidservant busy with the morning chores, visible in a distant doorway. The mistress of the house—who else could it be?—sits at the musical instrument. The room in which she is playing, typically, serves many functions. It contains, in addition to the virginals, a table, three chairs, and a curtained bed.

But all is not what it appears to be. Closer inspection of the painting reveals that the woman is not playing for herself alone; on the bed, behind the curtains, someone is listening to the music. It is unquestionably a man—the figure wears a mustache—and, although he is hidden, his clothing is fully visible on the chair in the foreground. The hilt of a sword that is barely within the picture and the casual fashion in which the clothes have been thrown on the chair—instead of being hung neatly on the hooks behind the door—hint, in a delicate way, that this man may not be the woman's husband. Marital infidelity was frowned upon in Calvinist Holland and de Witte fulfilled his social obligations by making it the subject of an allegory, although that tale is hidden in a series of riddles, symbols, and secondary meanings. The jug and towel on the table, the water pump, and the woman sweeping the floor suggest something along the lines of "Cleanliness is next

\* Genre paintings, since they were to be hung in the home, were usually small; de Witte's was only thirty by forty inches. Many were less than half that size.

to godliness." But part of the delight of this genre is the painter's ambiguity toward his subject. Is the woman properly penitent? If so, why is she playing and not weeping? She has her back turned, as if in shame, but in the mirror hanging on the wall over the virginals, her face is tantalizingly not quite reflected. Maybe she is smiling; we will never know.

One does not need to unravel the turgid story that lies hidden in the shadows and details of de Witte's painting. He was interested not only in narrative but also, like most Dutch painters, in portraying the material world as he saw it. This love of the real world—"realism" is too weak a word—was evident in many details. We can enjoy the way that the shadow of the windows falls on the partly open door, the red taffeta curtains that color the light in the room, the shiny brass of the chandelier, the rich gilt of the mirror frame and the matte texture of the pewter jug. There is a little dog curled up beside the bed; sheet music lies open on top of the virginals. Nothing is too small to escape the painter's attention.

It should be said immediately that it is unlikely that de Witte's was a depiction of an actual house; photographic as his paintings appear, they are imagined, not real. De Witte's churches, for example, were not portraits of existing buildings; although they were based on sketches of identifiable interiors, the finished paintings combine elements from different churches. What we cannot ignore, however, is that while the house may have been imagined, the effect is real, and it is above all one of extreme intimacy.

The furniture is not complicated; the padded chairs look comfortable but lack the fringes and embroidered material that were then popular in France. The rooms are *enfilade*, but the effect is not intimidating. The walls are plain, although they are typically adorned with a mirror, as well as with a map visible through the doorway. The stone floor is a simple pattern of black and white squares of marble. This is a well-to-do household—the musical instrument, the oriental carpet

and the gilded mirror attest to that—but the atmosphere is not one of luxury. Objects are not on display; instead, we have the impression of a simple practicality from the way that the furnishings are arranged. The bed is located in a corner, behind the door; the rug is thoughtfully placed beside the bed, to take the morning chill off the cold stone floor. The mirror hangs over the virginals. The table and chairs sit next to the window, near the light. And what light! The rooms are illuminated to emphasize their depth and distance, as well as their physical, material reality. It is above all this sense of interior space, and hence of insideness, that distinguishes this painting. Instead of being a picture of a room, it is a picture of a home.

De Witte's true subject was the domestic atmosphere itself, which is the reason that this genre of painting was for so long dismissed as a minor one, and which is precisely why it is of interest here. De Witte was not, of course, the only practitioner of the domestic genre. Pieter de Hooch, a Delft neighbor, produced an entire oeuvre documenting the everyday life of the ordinary bourgeois. He showed them in their homes, usually at work, engrossed in some commonplace task, and he carefully depicted their houses and gardens with architectural accuracy. Unlike de Witte, he was less concerned with narrative and more interested in portraying an idealized domesticity. Although he subordinated the human figure to its background, his scenes always included one or two persons, usually women with children. During the Renaissance, when women had been solitary figures in a painting, it was as Madonnas, saints or biblical personages, the Dutch painters were the first to choose ordinary women as their subject. It was natural for women to be the focus of de Witte's paintings, because the domestic world that he was depicting had become *their* realm. The world of male work, and male social life, had moved elsewhere. The house had become the place for another kind of work—specialized domestic work—women's

work. This work itself was nothing new, but its isolation was. Medieval paintings had always shown women at work, but they were rarely alone, and inevitably their work occurred amid the activities of men—people talking, eating, conducting business, or lounging about. De Hooch's women work alone, quietly.

Jan Vermeer, another Delft painter, was predominantly interested in the female human figure and less in the domestic interior, but since almost all his masterly paintings are set in the home, they also convey something of its character. His subjects act with a concentration that is mirrored in the still atmosphere of the room and its furnishings. Through Vermeer's paintings we can see how the house has changed: it has become a setting for private acts and personal moments. *The Love Letter* shows the mistress of the house being interrupted by her maid bringing her a letter. We can see the corner of an ornate fireplace, as well as a gilt leather wall panel and a seascape hanging on the wall (the last two items actually belonged to Vermeer). Ignoring the narrative clues—the letter, the mandolin, the seascape—what is most striking is the relationship between the two women sharing a private moment, and the way that Vermeer has placed us in another room, emphasizing the intimacy of the event and also achieving a sense of domestic space in a highly original way. The various objects in the home—a laundry basket, a broom, clothing, a pair of shoes—establish the predominance of the women in this space. The man, from whom the letter presumably comes, is far away; even if he were not he would have to tread warily on the freshly cleaned black-and-white-tiled marble floor. When a male is included in a Vermeer, one has the sense that he is a visitor—an intruder—for these women do not simply inhabit these rooms, they occupy them completely. Whether they are sewing, playing the spinet, or reading a letter, the Dutch women are solidly, emphatically, contentedly at home.

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The feminization of the home in seventeenth-century Holland was one of the most important events in the evolution of the domestic interior. It had several causes, chief among them the limited use made of servants. Even the wealthiest household rarely employed more than three servants, while a typical prosperous bourgeois family included, at most, a single maid-servant. Compare this to the Bruns, who had, in addition to their three employees, two servants, or to the typical British bourgeois family of that time which would have had at least half a dozen domestics. Dutch law was explicit on contractual arrangements and on the civil rights of servants, so that the relationship between employer and employee was less exploitive and closer than elsewhere in Europe; servants ate with their masters at the same table, for instance, and housework was shared instead of delegated. All this produced, for the seventeenth century, a remarkable situation: Dutch married women, irrespective of their wealth or social position, did most of their own household chores. It has been recorded that when the wife of Admiral de Ruyter was visited on the day after her husband's death by an envoy of the *stadhouder*, the Prince of Orange, she could not receive him, since she had recently sprained her ankle—while hanging out the laundry!<sup>22</sup> When de Witte was commissioned to paint a wealthy burgher's wife, Adriana van Heusden, he depicted her shopping with her little daughter in an Amsterdam fish market. It would be impossible to imagine a wealthy French or English lady performing the same duty, or wishing to be immortalized in such prosaic surroundings.

Dutch married women had "the whole care and absolute management of all their *Domestique*," according to Temple.<sup>23</sup> This included taking charge of the cooking. Contemporary accounts by foreign visitors were clear on this point, although, particularly in the case of Frenchmen, characteristically dis-

paraging remarks were made about the unsophisticated cuisine of the Dutch. However that might be, this small change had far-reaching consequences. When servants were doing the cooking, the room containing the kitchen was hardly differentiated from the other rooms, and was in any case accorded a secondary position. In Parisian bourgeois houses, for example, the kitchen occupied a room off the courtyard but without direct access to the main rooms. In English terrace houses the kitchen, adjacent to the servant quarters, continued to be located in the basement until the nineteenth century. In most *appartements* the "kitchen" was no more than a pot hanging in the fireplace.

In the Dutch home the kitchen was the most important room; according to one historian, "the kitchen was promoted to a position of fantastic dignity and became something between a temple and a museum."<sup>24</sup> Here were located the cupboards that held the prized table linens, china, and silver. Copper and brass utensils, brightly polished, hung on the walls. The chimney piece was enormous and elaborately decorated—overly so to modern tastes—and contained not only the hearth with the traditional hanging pot, but also a simple kind of stove. The sink was copper, sometimes marble. Some kitchens had interior hand pumps (one is visible in de Witte's painting) and even reservoirs with a continuous supply of hot water. The presence of such amenities signified the growing importance of domestic work and the premium that was beginning to be placed on convenience. This was natural. For the first time, the person who was in intimate contact with housework was also in a position to influence the arrangement and disposition of the home. Servants had to put up with inconvenient and ill-thought-out arrangements because they had no say in the matter. The mistress of the house, particularly when she was as independent-minded as the Dutch woman, did not.

The importance accorded the kitchen reflected the central

position of the woman in the Dutch household. The husband may have been the head of the family and led the mealtime prayers, but in household matters he was no longer "master in his own house." It was the wife, not her husband, who insisted on cleanliness and tidiness, not the least because it was she who had to do the cleaning. This simple self-interest is a much more convincing explanation of the clean Dutch house than either climate or national character.

There are many examples of domestic order in Holland maintained by women. Smoking tobacco was popular among Dutch men, and their wives went to great lengths to keep the odor out of their homes. Some women even had "no smoking" clauses inserted into their marriage contracts; if all else failed they set aside a "smoking room" for their nicotic spouses. In any case, once a year the entire house was emptied for a major cleaning (this was in addition to the regular weekly washings). Men, forbidden access and deprived of hot meals, referred to this period as "hell." Formal parlors were also cleaned regularly, although they were used rarely. One burgher confessed to Temple that there were two rooms in his own house that he was not permitted to enter, and had never done so.<sup>25</sup> Although Dutch men continued to wear their hats at the table (except when saying grace) and rarely washed their hands before eating, the evolution of bourgeois—as opposed to courtly—manners had begun.

The imposition of a special code of behavior within the home was considered odd by foreign visitors, although that opinion may have been biased, since those visitors whose records have survived were exclusively male. Stories of the strictness, if not tyranny, of the Dutch mistress abounded; undoubtedly many were apocryphal. But they all pointed to a change in domestic arrangements. Not only was the house becoming more intimate, it was also, in the process, acquiring a special atmosphere. It was becoming a feminine place, or at least a place under feminine control. This control was

tangible and real. It resulted in cleanliness, and in enforced rules, but it also introduced something to the house which had not existed before: domesticity.

To speak of domesticity is to describe a set of felt emotions, not a single attribute. Domesticity has to do with family, intimacy, and a devotion to the home, as well as with a sense of the house as embodying—not only harboring—these sentiments. It was the atmosphere of domesticity that permeated de Witte's and Vermeer's paintings. Not only was the interior a setting for domestic activity—as it had always been—but the rooms, and the objects that they contained, now acquired a life of their own. This life was not, of course, autonomous, but existed in the imagination of their owners, and so, paradoxically, homely domesticity depended on the development of a rich interior awareness, an awareness that was the result of the woman's role in the home. If domesticity was, as John Lukacs suggested, one of the principal achievements of the Bourgeois Age, it was, above all, a feminine achievement.<sup>26</sup>