The Five Senses in Genre Paintings of the Dutch Golden Age

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Abstract

This article aims to study one of the most popular themes in 17th-Century Dutch genre paintings - the five senses - in its forms and religious interpretations. Firstly, while two means of representation were used to clearly illustrate the subject, some genre scenes could also be read on a subtle level; this effectively means that such five senses images can be interpreted somewhere between clarity and ambiguity. Secondly, three distinct religious meanings were identified in these genre paintings. Vanity was associated with the theme because the pursuit of pleasure is futile, while sin was believed to be committed via sensory organs. As for the Parable of the Prodigal Son, party scenes alluding to the five senses can be read as relating to the episode of the son having spent all his fortune.

Keywords: *Five Senses, Genre Painting, Dutch Golden Age, Prodigal Son*

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Introduction

In the 16th and 17th Centuries, the five senses had never been more popular as subject matter for graphic art, especially in the Low Countries. Since Nordenfalk (1985), this theme has been occasionally discussed in monographs, catalogues of specific artists, or Dutch genre painting studies. Yet, an analysis of the modes of representation of the five senses seems to have been ignored, and there is a certain lack of fresh interest in their religious interpretations. From this observation, this article aims to firstly examine how the five senses were represented in the Dutch genre paintings of the Golden Age, inspect how artists narrated them; secondly, reinvestigate how they can be religiously interpreted and propose deeper meanings which go beyond realistic appearance.

The Five Senses in Genre Paintings: Between Clarity and Ambiguity

Five Senses in Clarity

One of the first pictures representing all the five senses together is an engraving by Adriaen Collaert, after Adam van Noort, dated at the end of the 16th-Century (figure.1) (Jütte, 2005; Kolfin, 2005). It illustrates five naked women and one man around a table, enjoying a feast in the open air. The five maidens, symbolize the five senses as follows: the first one on the left, holding a torch and a mirror, represents sight; the one with a basket of fruits and a glass of wine stands for taste; a woman with a bouquet of flowers and a laurel wreath signifies smell; the one on the right, held by the man, allegorizes touch; and a woman in the foreground playing a lute corresponds to the sense of hearing. The fact that all five women hold something or act intentionally in a different way suggesting each sense, makes one easily identify the true meaning of this engraving. Moreover, the Latin inscription reminds the viewer of temperance before the use of the human senses (Kermode, 1961-62). Didactic, this engraving is not a realistic depiction of Dutch "bourgeois society" as Jütte (2005) claimed. However, as all the senses were depicted in this one image, it could be considered a prototype representation, which Dutch artists of the next generation would bear in mind.

Figure 1. Adriaen Collaert, after Adam van Noort, *Allegory of the Five Senses,* the end of the 16th-Century, engraving, 21.9 x 27 cm, London, British Museum.[1]

A painting by Jan van Bijlert, dated between 1625 and 1630, takes on the idea of how the five senses should be represented from the engraving (figure. 2). Bijlert imagined this assembly between six figures, all comrades, which he set against a dark background around a table - an object that was previously used by Van Noort. On the left, a woman holds a mirror and a magnifying glass, while a cupid is looking down at the mirror. Behind her stands a man who smells a flower. In the center, a woman plays a lute next to a man who is pinching himself. On the right, a man squeezes the juice from some grapes and savors it. It is clearly evident that all five senses - sight, smell, hearing, touch, and taste - are all represented here. Another painting by Jan Lievens, painted in 1622, is also directly comparable to Bijlert's and again clearly depicts the five senses through six principal figures: a young man with a glass of wine; an old man wearing glasses; a couple touching each other; a smoker; and a lute player. Like Bijlert, Lievens emphasized his figures by using a dark background to illustrate all five senses. However, this painting corresponds more to what genre painting is as one could actually perceive this party in everyday life, while, though a small figure, Bijlert's cupid transforms the realistic reunion into more a mythological scene

Figure 2. Jan van Bijlert, *The Five Senses,* 1625-1630, oil on canvas, 148.6 x 187.3 cm, Wellesley, The Davis Museum, Wellesley College.[2]

Even if the pictures appear to show activities that could occur in real life, the viewer cannot possibly be mistaken about the fundamental subject, which is clearly represented via the main figures and their attitudes. Thus, the assemblage of all the senses in one image facilitates the way one comprehends what lies beneath the realistic appearance. Nevertheless, a series of Dutch genre paintings are similarly effective in terms of a clear reading of the subject.

This mode of representation had been used since the Middle Ages; the French series of *La Dame à la licorne* is one remarkable example (Taburet-Delahaye, 2013). In the end of the 16th and beginning of the 17th centuries, artists like Maertin de Vos and Hendrik Goltzius drew and painted the theme in series, which were then engraved. De Vos designed his series with a female figure in the center and the depiction of biblical scenes in the background. For example, in *Sight (Visus)*, in the middle, a woman holds a mirror and looks through it. Next to her is an eagle whose extraordinary vision is praised in the inscription beneath. In the back, on the left, God presents the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil to Adam and Eve, whereas on the right, Jesus returns vision to a blind man. Goltzius, on the other hand, illustrated in a more secular manner the senses through pairs of lovers in his series of 1595. In *Hearing*, a couple makes music together whilst a stag with fine ears is depicted on the left.

In Dutch genre paintings of the 17th-Century, five pictures by Anthonie Palamedes, represented the five senses as a series (figure. 3). Either taking example from De Vos or Goltzius or perhaps attempting to illustrate the subject in the different manner of his peers Bijlert and Lievens, Palamedes portrayed a sequence of everyday life. A painting with a mother breastfeeding her child and a monkey eating some fruit depicts taste. In another painting, a lute player singing pertains to hearing. Touching is connoted in a painting in which a farmer holds a feather, while in another, sight is symbolized by a woman looking at herself through a mirror. Finally, in the last painting of the series, a pipe smoker and a dog signify the sense of smell.

Figure 3. Anthonie Palamedes, *Five Senses series,* 1630-1640, oil on canvas, 35 x 27 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre.[3]

In the same spirit, Jan Miense Molenaer depicted a series of five genre paintings, corresponding to the five senses. Even so, some changes are evident as the artist chose to portray at least three figures in each painting, and a humorous tone is palpable in two of the five paintings. For the sense of touch, Molenaer painted a couple fighting with a woman hitting the head of a man. A third figure witnesses the fight and laughs at them. Another couple looking inside a vase symbolizes sight. Smell is represented by a picture of a mother changing her child's diaper; a man, perhaps the father, aghast at the bad odor; and a man laughing in the background (figure. 4). An image of a man drinking with his friends matches the sense of taste. Finally, the last painting is not so easily interpreted. The main figure is a man holding a jar. The way he turns his head to the viewer and seems to speak or sing can suggest the only sense left - that of hearing. Since it is a series, if one looks at a painting separately and not the all five at once, one may have trouble reading the picture as each painting seems to reflect real life. Thus, one may consider the pictures to only depict facets of Dutch society, while in fact the meaning of the five senses lies under the realistic shell of representation.

Figure 4. Jan Miense Molenaer, *Smell*, 1637, oil on panel, 19.5 x 24.2 cm, The Hague, Mauritshuis.[4]

Five Senses in Ambiguity

One of the themes that we can possibly link to how the five senses are portrayed is through the painting genre known as *merry company.* This theme may have been brought over from the southern Netherlands by David Vinckboons when he left for Amsterdam at the end of 16th-Century (Legrand, 1963). His painting, *Fête Champêtre,* represents a feast where men and women enjoy themselves: eating, drinking and making music. In the background, on the left, some couples engage in the rituals of courting. David Vinckboons must have had a certain influence on

Dirck Hals, who worked mainly in Haarlem (Legrand, 1963; Kolfin, 2005), as Hals depicted similar unions of young and happy couples outdoors or in gardens (Kolfin, 2005).

A painting portraying the *merry company* theme by Hals' *Garden Party* is an interesting case (figure. 5). It illustrates, in the foreground, well-dressed couples, with a waiter, partying around a table. The painting perfectly represents "bourgeois society" in a more realistic way than the engraving by Collaert, after Van Noort. While Brown (1999) mentions the *merry companies* by Hals, he refuses to consider any hidden moral or religious messages in Dutch genre paintings which, in his opinion, are not sermons and represent nothing more than the image of everyday life that they project pictorially. However, this genre painting reveals subtly the five senses. To paraphrase Franits' analysis (2008): the couple smelling a flower represents the sense of smell; another couple kissing each other illustrates touch; a man looking at the latter by using a little telescope allegorizes sight; the last couple with a woman holding a glass of wine symbolizes taste; and the final sense, hearing, is represented by a man playing a lute on the right. Therefore, this picture of a simple outdoor social gathering conceals a more complex meaning concerning men and women's drunken pleasure experienced through the organs of the five senses.

Figure 5. Dirck Hals, *Garden Party,* early 1620's, oil on panel, 28 x 45 cm, present location unknown.[5]

Jan Steen is one of the specialists in Dutch genre paintings of the 17th-Century. His work concerns mostly indoor genre scenes representing real-life Dutch people such as peasants, soldiers or prostitutes; his figures completely differ from Hals' frequent protagonists. One of his paintings, *Beware of Luxury,* shows a carefree gathering in a middle-class house (figure. 6). If one should look carefully at the picture, one would find that the five senses are covertly represented via figures and objects. Sight is symbolized by a man wearing a black hat who holds a book

in his hands. In the center, a woman with a vase and a glass of wine portrays the sense of taste. Smell is allegorized by a man holding branches of roses and a young boy who smokes. A violinist illustrates hearing while touch is conveyed in the image of an infant holding a spoon and a necklace. Besides the human figures and objects that accompany them, Steen adds further hints of some of the senses. For instance, a pig sniffing a rose on the floor indicates the sense of smell whereas the playing cards, also on the ground, signify touch. These two clues, among others, help the viewer comprehend the allegorized meaning of the painting, while at the same time masking the theme of the five senses as Steen meticulously organizes his composition so that this painting appears to seemingly project the image of a Dutch family's filthy interior. As we have seen in Bijlert's process or Lievens' painting, the way Steen insinuates the five senses here is completely different: the viewer must look around wisely in order to see beyond the realistic facade of this genre painting.

Figure 6. Jan Steen, Beware of Luxury (In Weelde Siet Toe), 1663, oil on canvas, 105 x 145.5 cm, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.[6]

The Five Senses in Genre Paintings: Religious Interpretations

Vanity

One of the themes that can be associated with the five senses is *vanitas*, which means emptiness or aimlessness. It concerns a specific type of symbolic representation, developed with mostly figurative narration in the 16th-Century before being superseded by the still life in the next century. *Vanitas* is used in the Latin version of the book of Ecclesiastes (1: 2): *"vanitas vanitatum dixit Ecclesiastes vanitas vanitatum omnia vanitas."* (Meaningless! Meaningless! says the Teacher. Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.) As a representation, *vanitas* proposes a

vision of a futile world and the brevity of life, and can very well be linked to the theme of five senses as can be seen in some 17th-Century French still lifes or the self-portrait of Dutch painter David Bailly, with objects alluding to the senses (Bartha-Kovács, 2013).

In fact, regarding the five senses and the meaningless of things, Legrand (1963) rightly pointed out that there is an intersection between them that can be represented, due to the fact that pleasure and happiness are procured by human beings by the five senses and that the enjoyment that occurs is meaningless. Thus, the genre scenes cited in this work are supposed to be connected to the vanity theme. However, the authors have found that not every painting seems to fit Legrand's statement. For example, the comical mood found in two paintings in the series by Molenaer does not quite fit any religious meaning. The observer in the two scenes representing the senses of touching and smelling is clearly an admonitor, inviting the viewer to mock and laugh. On the other hand, a quite cheerful tone, like that conveyed in the paintings by Bijlert, Lievens or in some *Merry Companies,* helps the viewer realize how joy is shallow and impermanent.

Since all pleasures are transitory and each sense and its representation - though not automatically every representation - can refer to earthly vanity, art historians have tried to associate a particular sense with this "meaningless" religious notion. For instance, in Dutch art, Sonnema (1997) tied representations of music to vanity. Indeed, in this research, the sense of hearing was, most of the time, represented by the image of a musician or musicians making ephemeral music. Nevertheless, one sense and its common representation appear to best convey vanity. An engraving, made around 1650 by Hendrick Bary, depicts a man smoking and looking at the smoke - a reference to the sense of smell. There is an inscription below the picture that reads: "Terwijl ik ijvrig rook Verinis, kleijn gesneen, Denk ik vast bij mij self; Soo vliegt de Weerelt heen." ("When I smoke Verinis, finely minced, I think to myself; so this is how the world flies away as a smoke.") (Brown, 1984).

These words "exemplify … the *vanitas* content" (Nehlsen-Marten, 2003). They remind us of how the world is vain and frivolous like smoke, which corresponds perfectly to the Bible. Therefore, any engraving or painting with a figure of a smoker reflects allegorically not only the particular sense but also how the smoker's "life is dispersing without a purpose, like the smoke of his tobacco" (Brown, 1984). So a smoker from Palamedes' series can very well be interpreted from the perspective of *vanitas*, just like *A Smoker* by Adriaen Brouwer, which could have been part of a series of the five senses theme (De Jongh, 1976). It depicts in the middle of the painting a man who smokes absent-mindedly, while the smoke drifts.

Sin

Images of a feast, a reunion, and other *merry company* works show a glimpse of everyday Dutch life. Nevertheless, they were used to warn people against sin (Sluijter, 1997) and illustrated the excess they must avoid. Cicero first expressed the idea of the five senses as windows of the soul (Yonge, 1888; Jütte, 2005), an idea later Christianized (Jütte, 2005) and expressed in the 14th-Century book *Pèlerinage*

de la vie humaine by abbot Guillaume de Diguileville as doors through which sin could enter the soul (De Jongh, 1995). Translated into Dutch, the *Boeck van den pelgrim* was very popular in the Netherlands; the idea of the five senses as entrances of sin - "Par ces V portes, ne doutez, Entre souvent ordure assez, ..." ("through these five doors, do not doubt, enter quite the litter...") (Stürzinger, 1893) - would have influenced the artists of the 16th and 17th centuries.

Brothel scene by Richard Brakenburgh (figure. 7) seems to represent the simple interior of a brothel with a young prostitute, a client, an old matchmaker, and a servant, yet some motifs appear to point to the senses. For instance, a vase of wine and oysters allegorize the sense of taste; a pipe symbolizes smell; some playing cards suggest touch; and a sketchbook of prostitutes' portraits indicates sight (De Jongh, 1995). The only sense that seems to be missing here is hearing. It is interesting to point out the broom in the painting. De Jongh's work on its profound meaning helps us gain a better comprehension of artworks such as this one. The broom's symbolic meaning is that of cleaning all the sin out from man's soul (as in *Pèlerinage de la vie humaine*), as a tool to clean the house, of which God is mistress, from sin (De Jongh, 1995; Stürzinger, 1893). In this brothel scene, the senses symbolized by everyday-life elements insinuate sin and fleeting, worldly pleasure - even a map of the world is shown in the background (De Jongh, 1995). However, the presence of the broom gives this painting a deeper, religious meaning. Looking at this depiction of lascivious life, the viewer must be surely aware, through the broom placed right in the front, that this is not an exemplary way of life. For De Jongh (2005), the broom represents "…a weapon for removing the distasteful objects on the floor, and then ultimately in a metaphorical sense, as a means of banishing the evil displayed here." Yet, its position in the foreground, and the way it invites the viewer to gradually enter the scene from brush to handle suggest that it is our responsibility, as sinners, to clean away all the dirt and conduct ourselves in a good manner.

Merry Company from 1629 by Isack Elyas (figure. 8) also suggests how sin is connected to the senses. De Jongh (1995; 1997) asserts that this picture of a feast depicts all the five senses and that the viewer at the time immediately understood it to show that all sin originates from these senses. Yet it seems that unlike Bijlert or Lievens, Elyas portrayed each sense so subtly in this scene of an indoor gathering that three of the five senses can possibly be found in three different representations. Apart from smell, symbolized by a little dog on the lap of a woman, and hearing, indicated by a singer holding a lute, taste, sight and touch are further represented possibly two or three times. A man and a glass of wine seem to clearly symbolize taste but he also takes off his hat, which could be interpreted as the sense of touch. Then, an old man and a piece of paper may indicate the sense of touch as he holds the paper, or even sight because he can also read it. Finally, the couple in the center may represent the sense of touch as the man holds a glass. However, his gesture of showing this glass to the woman, pointing it towards her, may be read as the sense of sight, or simply taste as he has just finished his wine from the glass.

Figure 7. Richard Brakenburgh, *Brothel Scene,* The Hague, Hoogsteder & Hoogsteder.[7]

Figure 8. Isack Elyas, *Merry Company,* 1629, oil on panel, 47.1 x 63.2 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.[8]

On the right, a standing couple looks right at the viewer. While the rest enjoy the feast, these two people do not partake of the banquet, as though they resist the

excess of things, of all the pleasures engendered by the means of the five senses. Thus, they are role models for the viewer, a righteous image used as a counterpoint to sin and sinners. Their function is, in a way, comparable to that of the broom as both remind the viewer that living in excess is immoral, and the merry celebrators need to be cleansed from sin. Another detail in the painting can be related to the couple as well. On the left, a painting of The Flood hangs on the wall (De Jongh, 1997). Humanity's misdeeds, represented here with the scene of a feast, lead to such a divine judgement that only Noah and his family survived by God's grace. The souls of this couple, who live righteously or who now are remorseful after living in such depravity, will then, when The Last Judgement comes, be saved.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

This parable (Luke, 15 : 11-32) is another religious interpretation that can be found in the Dutch genre paintings of the Golden Age (Kermode, 1961-62). Catholics and Protestants do not share the same theological interpretation of this parable, and we shall return later to this point relating to the parable's representation.

It is the story of a young man who having received his inheritance from his father, leaves home, and squanders away all his money. Then, he has to work as a swineherd before repenting, and coming home to his father who welcomes and forgives him. Since the 13th-Century, the story has been depicted as subject matter in art (Réau, 1957). It became very popular in the Netherlands in the 15th and 16th centuries. For instance, in about 1530 Pieter Coecke van Aelst drew a sequence of the biblical narrative emphasizing the particular episode of the son squandering his legacy, surrounded by prostitutes.

Figure 9. Jan Sanders van Hemessen, *The Prodigal Son,* 1536, oil on panel, 140 x 198 cm, Brussels, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts.[9]

This mode of representing the parable is fairly similar to Jan Sanders van Hemessen's as he also focused on the brothel scene in his *Prodigal Son*, painted in 1536,

with the background showing his miserable adventure, his repentance, and his father's forgiveness (figure. 9). In 1596, Jacques de Gheyn II engraved the parable after a work by Karen van Mander. The engraving displays, for the most part, an outdoor feast, which the son, his friends and loose women attend. On the left, in the background, a woman banishes a man from a house; this suggests the event following the party, when the son is penniless.

These are examples of how a reunion scene was portrayed during the 15th and 16th Centuries in the Netherlands. Interestingly, there actually is no clarification in the biblical text of how the son spends his money when he leaves his home. In the gospel it only reads: "[he] squandered his wealth in wild living." For this reason, any artist who picks this subject matter can freely imagine the episode of the son's depraved life (Wallen, 1983), and this is why we can possibly associate the representation of the five senses with a banquet scene to the image of the parable.

Hals' outdoor *Merry Companies* can very well be regarded as a particular story of the son's reckless extravagance. Projecting pictorially the son's garden party, they are reminiscent of Van Aelst's drawing and the engraving by De Gheyn II where a scene or some other included scenes evoke the rest of the parable. In the same spirit, other artists focused on the party too, but imagined it indoors, in a house or a brothel like in Brakenburgh's painting. In the latter, a man is portrayed seeking carnal pleasure in a house of prostitution, which was commonly associated by artists of the 16th-Century like Van Hemessen, with the narration of the parable. Standing before such a scene, the viewer at the time of the Dutch Golden Age must have been able to guess there to be a deeper layer to this everyday brothel scene.

In Steen's *Beware of Luxury,* the son is portrayed by a sitting man in the center of the scene, spending his money in "wild living." A pig sniffing a rose on the floor, we have seen, indicates the sense of smell, while a Netherlandish proverb "throwing roses before the swine", meaning wastefulness, relates to this image too (Westermann, 1996; Chapman et al.,1996). Nevertheless, it can also be interpreted as a sign of the next episode of the son's life, when he took on work as a swineherd after squandering his entire fortune.

Finally, in relating these Dutch genre paintings with their indirect representations of the five senses to the parable, it is clear that the son's wastefulness is at the core of the parable's representation. Even though these Dutch genre scenes were painted at the time of the Reformation, they do not seem to show the Protestant point of view on the parable's interpretation, which accentuates "God's mercy toward remorseful sinners, and (…) the doctrine of Justification through Faith without church rituals." (Donahue Kuretsky, 2007) In truth, they simply illustrate how sinful the son is, yet they could adopt the Protestant perspective thereafter to suggest God's forgiveness of the son, who is a sinner but most importantly faithful. At the same time, Italian paintings like the two versions of the *Fortune Teller* and the *Cardsharps by Caravaggio,* though they do not appear to allude to the five senses, have often been interpreted as representations of the Prodigal Son's misadventures leading to his remorse (Hibbard, 1983; Puglisi, 1998; Moir, 1983). Thus, the

image of a sinful son serves as support from which the Catholic message could be delivered: for his reconciliation with God, the son must repent and confess through the sacrament of penance. In addition, as Barbara Haeger argued, there seems to be rarely any differences in the interpretation of the parable between Catholic and Protestant art because it is too complex to accurately represent both sides of the theological doctrine in the images, while "The burden of interpretation rests with the viewer and his knowledge of the subject's significance as defined by his Church." (Haeger, 1986; Proimos, 2011)

Conclusion

Dutch genre painters of the Golden Age represented the five senses in two manners. The first consists of a direct representation with the figures and objects indicating clearly each sense, all in the same image, or in a series. The second form of representation deals with camouflaging the theme in a picture of everyday life. The naturalist aspects of the figures and objects must be thoughtfully rendered so that the viewer would never be able to guess the allegorized message right away, but first and foremost enjoy the depiction of 17th-Century Dutch life. Compared to Bijlert, Lievens, Pamamedes or Molenaer, Hals and Steen had greater liberty in arranging their composition and narrating their story, as long as they were able to disguise the senses within their paintings. This theme was used not only to project something real and tangible of daily life, but also to deliver religious contemplations and codes of conduct in the time of the Reformation. Although represented cheerfully, life is yet futile and immoral as humans sin via their sensory organs. Nevertheless, some clues and allusions were included in these paintings to raise the moral awareness of the viewer. Ultimately, the viewer could identify himself as the faithful Prodigal Son who, despite squandering away what has been given to him, receives his father's pardon.

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Endnotes

1 Source: http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=3026813&partId=1.

2 Source: http://dms.wellesley.edu/results.php?module=objects&type=browse&id=1&term=Bijlert%2C+Jan+van&page=1

3 Source: http://cartelfr.louvre.fr/cartelfr/visite?srv=obj_view_obj&objet=cartel_8320_27270p0006679.003.jpg_obj.html&flag=false.

4 Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jan_Miense_Molenaer_010.jpg.

5 Source: Franits, Wayne. Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting: Its Stylistic and Thematic Evolution. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008, p. 31 fig. 22.

6 Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jan_Steen_-_Beware_of_Luxury_("In_Weelde_Siet_Toe")_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg.

7 Source: De Jongh, Eddy. Question of meaning: Theme and motif in Dutch seventeenth-Century painting. Leiden: Primavera Pers, 1995, p. 213, fig. 29.

8 Source: https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/SK-A-1754.

9 Source: http://www.wga.hu/html_m/h/hemessen/jan/prodigal.html.

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