During the third quarter of the seventeenth century, the most ambitious and talented painters working in the Dutch Republic did not become history painters, as had those of earlier generations. Though some of them painted biblical and mythological scenes at the beginning of their careers, they specialised in rendering beautifully dressed young women and men in wealthy interiors. Rivalry among this small circle of artists resulted in paintings of breathtaking artistic and technical quality. They executed these masterpieces for an elite circle of discerning collectors, who recognised and valued such quality and who bought their paintings for high prices.

Remarkably, the painters from this small group continually repeated the same subjects and motifs. Why did they all depict, for example, men standing behind seated women to pour wine, offer oysters or engage in some other flirtatious activity (e.g. cats 9.1–9.4)? Why time and again did they portray elegant young women receiving, reading and writing letters (e.g. cats 1.1–1.6, 2.1–2.4, 6.3), or sitting and standing before mirrors (e.g. cats 6.1, 6.5, 6.7–7.3) or playing keyboard instruments (e.g. cats 3.2–3.5, 4.1–4.3)? Why did they paint so many variations on themes and motifs that had been introduced by Gerard ter Borch and Gerrit Dou in the 1650s? To gain more insight into this phenomenon we have to consider contemporary notions about making and admiring art, and the interaction between artists and connoisseurs in relation to the specific character of these paintings.

The artists discussed here painted some of the most expensive works on the market and were not the kind who could do no better than borrow ideas and motifs from others. Neither was this repetitiousness a matter of efficiency to lower production costs, as had generally been the case with much less expensive paintings of merry companies and guardroom scenes by artists of the previous generation, including Dirck Hals, Pieter Codde, Anthony Palamedesz, Jacob Duck and Jan Miense Molenaer.

Repetition of characteristic motifs within the oeuvre of a single painter might be considered a ‘branding’ strategy to guarantee his paintings would be easily recognisable among works by other artists. This essay, however, is concerned with the repetition of...
related motifs by different painters, which, in regard to the artists included in this
exhibition, might be called emulative imitation. These painters were clearly familiar with
each other’s works, which suggests that they competed zealously and intentionally with
one another’s paintings, thereby to some extent challenging a small group of knowledgeable
connoisseurs to compare and assess their works. In the early modern period, ambitious
artists commonly practised imitation and emulation, but views on these concepts varied
and were rarely articulated. In this essay, I seek to clarify what imitation might have meant
for these high-life genre painters.

Art historians have traditionally described similarities between paintings by different
artists in terms of influence, a concept that tells us little about the artists’ motivation
or the nature of the similarities. Determining ‘sources’ for the superficial purpose of
tracing stylistic evolution through ‘influence’ does no more than turn painters into
passive recipients of seemingly mysterious artistic forces. Recognising sources, however,
remains crucial to the understanding of painters’ aspirations and intentions. During
their training, they learned through studying and copying prints, drawings and paintings. Thus
an artist built up an ‘image bank’ of forms, motifs, manners and techniques on which
to draw when conceiving their own works. The conscious or unconscious choices made
using this material could result in something conventional, modestly novel or radically
innovative, depending upon individual talents and goals. In order to assess and appreciate
what new artists sought to achieve, as well as to measure their innovations, art lovers needed
to be aware – as do art historians today – of artists’ handling of such sources. But this
imitative use of resources should not necessarily be called emulative imitation. The latter
might be described as a pursuit in which self-conscious artistic rivalry with other artists
was paramount. The relationship between imitation and emulation, however, remained
vague, and contemporary writers on art struggled with the question of the extent to which
recognisable imitation was permissible.

Both conscious imitation and rivalry with predecessors and peers were essential
components of the early modern educational system, which was based on theories of
rhetoric developed in classical antiquity by writers including Cicero, Quintilian, Horace
and Seneca. One learned oration by memorising beautiful turns of phrase and figures of
speech from exemplary models, and striving to apply them effortlessly. The next important
step was to develop something new out of the gathered materials by thoroughly digesting
them and implementing them in accordance with one’s own talents. Such methods were
applied to prose, poetry and, ultimately, painting. The oft-repeated Senecan simile of bees
gathering nectar from a variety of flowers to make honey implied how essential it was that
one learned to gather the most valuable elements from exemplary sources for storage in
one’s memory in order to transform those sources through one’s ingenuity to produce
something different and new.

In his Schilder-Boeck (1604) Karel van Mander discussed borrowing from others only
as part of the artistic learning process. When advising young painters to work hard if they
wanted to improve, he advised them to behave like ‘thieves’ and freely borrow as many
bodies, hands and feet, and to mix these elements well. Learning through rapen (gathering),
thus, was an inherent part of a painter’s training. Once these borrowed elements,
which had been acquired through the copying of works by renowned masters, had been
 successfully assembled into a whole a student had accomplished an important step in the
learning process. Van Mander did not mention surpassing others when using borrowed
material during one’s artistic training. Nor did he discuss the established painter’s attitude
towards practice of imitation and emulation; apparently he felt no need to define or explain
them. These practices were clearly part of the process of the advancement of great art: his
biographies of Italian and Netherlandish painters are full of examples of how renowned
artists followed, rivalled and outstripped their masters and others.

The attitude towards imitation and emulation became more troubled as the status of the
painter and the role of the connoisseur changed in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth
centuries. Vasari and Van Mander had written in their Lives (1558 and 1604, respectively)
about the careers and works of renowned painters, thus creating a history of art and
codifying a canon of artists who had contributed significantly to the progress of the art of
painting. They described standards of achievement, fame and value, and provided examples
of many different types of art and models for behaviour, against which new developments
could be measured by painters and art lovers alike. Both Vasari and Van Mander repeatedly
emphasised the driving force of rivalry and the decisive role of discerning patrons in
stimulating it.

A self-conscious type of imitation developed among ambitious artists such as Anthonie
Carracci, Guido Reni and Domenichino in Italy, and Peter Paul Rubens and Rembrandt in
the Low Countries. By choosing elements from the canon and then analysing, digesting and
converting them, ambitious artists situated themselves into the history of art. Their work strongly appealed to knowledgeable connoisseurs, who could recognise their innovative handling of these models to create new inventions and assess
the place of the artist within this history. This also meant that one became more aware of
the limits of imitation, specifically the possibility of being accused of theft. The simile of
Aesop’s crow was used to illustrate this threat: according to the fable, a crow stole feathers
from other birds and prided itself on possessing so many beautiful colours. It became the
target of ridicule, however, when the other birds claimed their feathers, leaving the crow
a plain black bird.

As the canon applied to history painting, these issues would have occupied the minds
of painters of biblical and mythological subjects. Other artists, however, would have also felt
the anxiety of handling borrowings in the wrong way, especially those who catered to true
connoisseurs, who had begun to buy works of art by painters specialised in other fields for
rapidly increasing prices. We find this apprehension articulated by Philips Angel in his Zeef
der schilder-konst (1643), a short treatise based on a speech he had delivered to the Leiden
community of painters, aimed at reinforcing the dignity of local artists through somewhat
pompous prose. A fervent supporter of the still-young Gerrit Dou, Angel considered
skilful genre painters to be as admirable as history painters. In his treatise, he presented
the proper or improper way of borrowing as a burning issue. He examined the problem in
his discussion of sound judgement, which he regarded as one of the qualities required of a
good painter. From this passage one may gather that by this time many painters, including
Angel himself, considered Van Mander’s words as advice to be followed or ignored by
merely students. After warning against using material from others and claiming it as one’s
own, he asked rhetorically if it was not permitted to follow Van Mander’s advice. Angel
answered that artists may borrow only if doing so brings one’s own imperfectness closer to
perfection; then it serves to praise the master from whom it was taken. However, he also

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against this new canon of masterpieces admired by wealthy collectors. Onwards, a younger generation of ambitious genre painters could measure themselves than history painting. It is the birth of what Gerard de Lairesse would later call paintings of ‘parts’ of painting, as Van Mander had required of ambitious artists. Thus, ‘parts’ of painting, as Van Mander had required of ambitious artists as history paintings. (could create, in the words of Ter Borch’s father, ‘compositions with contemporary figures’ (ordonantsij van modarn in Delft and was shocked by the high price of 600 guilders for a painting with only one figure. He was just as indignant when he saw in the following days a painting by Dou with

This younger generation of artists had grown up in a period when the prices of paintings that proved to be immensely successful.

After all, these were also depictions of human figures interacting, for which one had to be proficient in the various ‘parts’ of painting, as Van Mander had required of ambitious artists. ‘Carefully transforming motifs from older scenes of contemporary people, Dou and Ter Borch developed new types that were pre-eminent for showing off highly refined painting techniques. Thus, they managed to establish new standards of what collectors deemed desirable in a field other than history painting. It is the birth of what Gerard de Lairesse would later call paintings of ‘parts’ of painting, ‘on the contrary, made high-quality works

The huge difference in price a successful artist could command compared to those labouring at the lower end of the market was relatively new. This was the result of the ever-growing divergence in the fame artists acquired. In the open art market, where the production of paintings had expanded enormously in volume and where a bewildering variety of types, subjects, sizes, styles, techniques and quality could be found, fame and reputation became particularly decisive. This leads us to understand Samuel van Hoorntuur’s urgent call not only to be a virtuous and skilful painter, but also to find well-disposed supporters ‘who spread [one’s] fame loudly’ (zie hem luiddere schepenroes) to actively promote one’s art. Without them, he argues, the artist ‘will hardly achieve any fame’, adding that art lovers are often partial. This idea is substantiated by the fact that cognoscenti such as Pieter Spiering, Johan de Bye, François de la Boë Sylvius and Pieter Claus van Ruyven owned a large number of paintings by a single artist such as Dou, Van Mieris or Vermeer. The artisan connoisseur’s role is clearly articulated by Franciscus Jonius, who wrote that an artist should paint ‘after the liking of accurate and judicious spectators, neither may he think himself to have painted well, unless skilfull men thinke him to have done so’ (De process of ‘rasking’ occurred the same way. The prices could not have been high enough when there was no such thing as a job market, where a bewildering variety of types, subjects, sizes, styles, techniques and quality could be found, fame and reputation became particularly decisive.

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knowledgeable connoisseurs who enjoyed discussing quality and style. By using similar themes and motifs and by referring to admired predecessors and contemporaries, painters actively provoked evaluation and debate about different properties of painting. While such connoisseurs’ debates were never written down, Samuel van Hoogstraten and Franciscus Junius’s publications offer glimpses into the issues they discussed.

Van Hoogstraten was a painter of this younger generation. During the first half of the 1640s he learned his art as Rembrandt’s pupil in Amsterdam and in the late 1660s he ventured into the field of high-life genre painting himself (fig. 15). In his De deling tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst (1678), Van Hoogstraten forcefully conveyed notions about the need for rivalry and the urge to surpass one’s masters and all others. He would have already been confronted with such ideas during his time in Rembrandt’s studio, because, as a young artist in Leiden, Rembrandt had been exposed to discussions about art by men of letters, including Constantijn Huygens, Petrus Scriverius, Theodorus Schrevelius and Jan Orlers. Moreover, at the time of Van Hoogstraten’s training in the early 1640s, Junius’s learned Painting of the Ancients (1637, 1638 and 1641) would have been the talk of the town among the Amsterdam intellectual and artistic elite. Until then, Van Mander’s Schilder-Bocck had been the only major treatise on painting. In essence, Junius’s book is an assemblage of quotations about painting from Greek and Roman authors, but Junius also applied many textual fragments from rhetoric to the art of painting, changing, for example, ‘orator’ into ‘painter’ in quotations from Cicero or Quintilian. Junius translated his Latin book into the vernacular himself, consciously developing a Dutch schilderspraeke (vocabulary to speak about painting). It has recently been demonstrated that Junius’s digressions, especially in the much longer Dutch version, were grounded in conversations about painting, in collectors’ and artists’ circles. Junius was secretary to one of the greatest collectors of the time, Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel, and personally knew artists such as Rubens and Anthony van Dyck. In 1653 he wrote to his brother-in-law Gerardus Vossius that ‘artists and all who love those delightful arts are pressing him to translate his book into the vernacular.’ One of these artists would have been the engraver Robert van Voerst, who was involved in the publication of the book; he was a close friend of Junius and also worked in Arundel’s service. He was also the step-uncle of Ter Borch, who was staying in Van Voerst’s London studio at precisely that time (1655–6). As a young and impressionable artist, Ter Borch would have absorbed every word of the conversations between learned connoisseurs and practising artists in Arundel’s circle.

Junius’s passages on imitation and emulation connected well-known classical sources to practices familiar to famous Netherlandish and Italian masters and connoisseurs. Such sections would have become exemplary for a generation that had started its career at that time – as is also clear from the numerous times Van Hoogstraten quoted from or referred to Junius’s text. Despite his emphasis on rivalry, Van Hoogstraten never fully articulated the relationship between imitation and rivalry and he seems quite ambivalent about allowing recognizable borrowings. By 1678 he had perhaps too often seen painters taking bits and pieces and ‘combining them unartfully and infectiously’, as Junius described the results when artists failed to digest their borrowings thoroughly. Junius, however, not being a painter but well acquainted with discussions among connoisseurs, did connect imitation and competition explicitly, thus providing insight into the preoccupations of art lovers. He defined aemulatio (the Dutchified version of the Latin aemulatio) as ‘rivalry or the ambition to imitate’. He considers this a necessary drive caused by ‘a restless desire for honour’ to surpass the best works of one’s master, the masters of one’s master and every other artist.

When discussing imitation, Junius also warned that one should disguise borrowings and that one’s paintings should not bear too much similarity to those of another renowned master. Having said this, however, Junius stated that if a work does resemble another, the likeness should be intentional: ‘Every artist is free to honour another artist because of elements he admires, for in my opinion, the artists who beat all others are those who diligently pursue the old art with a new argument, thus adroitly bestowing their paintings with the pleasurable enjoyment of dissimilar similarity [het aengenaeme vermaeck van een ongelijcke gelijkheydt].’ He added that this is especially true when one is driven by ‘praeseworthy competition’, and he emphasised that one should limit oneself to those elements that fit one’s own nature.

[Image 19: Samuel van Hoogstraten, The Doctor’s Visit, c. 1665, oil on canvas, 69.5 × 55 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, on loan from the City of Amsterdam (R. van der Hoog Bequest).]
This passage not only conveys that connoisseurs find it enjoyable to compare similar works by excellent masters, but also that the best masters possess a privilege reserved only for them: measuring themselves against other renowned artists by displaying their ‘dissimilar similarity’, bringing to the existing art ‘new arguments’ that suit their specific talent. Nevertheless, this suggests the risk that art lovers might be critical, judging the artist to have failed in finding the right balance between similarity and dissimilarity – which, of course, a narrow and subjective line. When the artist’s audacity is not considered sufficient and his ‘new argument’ is not convincing, he is merely joining borrowed bits and pieces, like Ansoo’s crew.

These notions are enlightening when examining paintings included in the exhibition. These works testify that the artists often aspired to achieve an emulative ‘dissimilar similarity’. They demonstrate their distinct approach to similar motifs in many aspects of their painting. Their ‘arguments’ could reside in the beauty and grace of the figures; the lifelike quality of poses and movements; the liveliness of expression; the ingenuity of the narrative (including the wit of the response to other artists); the arrangement of the figures; the suggestion of space through light and shade, colour and perspective. Finally, the manner of painting – not just the handling of the brush, but the diverse ways through which illusion is created through paint on a flat surface – was crucial to the ‘argument’. It was up to the connoisseur to compare all this with what he had seen, remembering in his mind’s eye other paintings or studying others first-hand in the collection he was visiting.

Magnificent examples of ‘dissimilar similarity’ are Frans van Mieris’s Dwarf (cat. 3.1), Ter Borch’s Young Woman at her Toilet with a Maid (cat. 6.1) and Woman at a Mirror (cat. 7.3), Vermeer’s Young Woman Standing at a Virginal (fig. 26) and Young Woman Seated at a Virginal (cat. 4.4) as well as Dou’s Woman at the Clavichord (cat. 4.1). The theme of women at a keyboard instrument exemplifies how such repeated subjects came into being and spread rapidly. I will discuss a sequence of such paintings in the catalogue entry Musical Duet (p. 128). I restrict myself here to the paintings mentioned above.

Ter Borch painted Young Woman at her Toilet with a Maid (cat. 6.1) around or shortly after 1650. It is, as far as we know, the first painting in which he made a great show of depicting a brilliantly rendered satin skirt worn by a young woman standing in a highly stylised pose and surrounded by luxurious furniture.22 With this painting Ter Borch created a type that became a resounding success, as appears not only from the number of related paintings he himself made in subsequent years, but chiefly from the extraordinary response this work sparked among other artists. This composition employs an upright format with relatively large figures in wealthy interiors, the figures are placed in bright light against a darkish background, with a focus on a woman’s shimmering satin skirt and an emphasis on graceful deportment. Ter Borch’s toilet scenes might be considered a demonstration of Angel’s advice concerning the use of borrowed motifs that should go unnoticed. It would not have been Ter Borch’s aim to view the viewer to recognise specific references. Rather, he knew how to ‘merge borrowed material in such a sweetly flowing manner into his own invention, that it cannot be perceived’, though the connoisseur would have grasped the resonances of a larger tradition.23

It is most striking that Ter Borch emphatically reinstated grace as a central feature. For more than a generation, most Dutch artists had consciously jettisoned grace (grazia, grazia, grazietchijlijf), which had been a central tenet in Renaissance thinking about art, in favour of an uncompromising naturalism.24 However, by this time, the tide had begun to change. For Ter Borch, inventions by Hendrick Goltzius appear to have been the canonical model, as a young student his father undoubtedly had supplied him with prints after Goltzius’s inventions to train him in drawing.25 When inventing Young Woman at her Toilet with a Maid, Ter Borch must have had engravings after Goltzius’s allegorical female figures of Sight and Pride in mind (figs. 21, 23). The remarkable pose – pelvis pushed forward, back pronouncedly arched, and neck inclined forward – can be seen in many mannerist prints by and after Goltzius.26 The figure of Pride, engraved by Jacob Matham, is even dressed in heavy satin sitting in similar folds. In fact, before Ter Borch, only Goltzius rendered the effect of the stiffness of heavy silk seen in Ter Borch’s skirts – made of material which ‘stands’ on the floor and falls in large angular planes. One of the artist’s largest and most famous prints, The Judgement of Midas (1590) (fig. 24) might also have been in the back of Ter Borch’s mind. Opulent satin costumes and similar poses (even the maid servant) are found there as well.27 I do not wish to suggest that Ter Borch consciously borrowed all such motifs from these prints, only that he recalled such inventions when conceiving Young Woman at her Toilet with a Maid.

Thus, with great ingenuity, Ter Borch drew on familiar pictorial and iconographic traditions.28 Canonical paintings such as Bernardo Strozzi’s Vanitas (The Old Courtesan) (fig. 53) and Rubens’s Venus before a Mirror (fig. 24) were also part of Ter Borch’s mental archive, as confirmed by Woman at a Mirror (cat. 7.1), also dating to the early 1650s. When conceiving this composition Ter Borch employed the other method, self-consciously and recognisably referring to admired inventions of great masters, blissfully turning them into something entirely different and creating a ‘dissimilar similarity’. Such a radical ‘new argument’ would be admired and discussed for its naturalism and wit. He transformed Strozzi’s Vanitas, which depicts an ugly old woman looking into a mirror while holding Venus’ roses, into a fashionably and gorgeously dressed
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The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.

A prime example is Van Mieris’s Duet (cat. 4.2) dated 1658, which, in turn, stimulated vigorous responses from other painters (see p. 128). It is precisely Ter Borch’s depiction of a richly dressed young lady’s gracefulness that Van Mieris appropriated. The Leiden painter certainly recognised the reference to Goltzius and altered the proportions of his young lady to further approach those of Goltzius’s mannerist type of women through lengthening the figure, making her neck longer and her head relatively smaller.

It would have been easy to connive that Van Mieris was vying with both Ter Borch and his own master, Dou. Van Mieris strove to surpass the exceptionally detailed refinement of Dou by making his brushstrokes entirely invisible. This resulted in a manner that lacked the liveliness of Dou’s painting technique, but he compensated for this through a lively play of light caressing all the surfaces. With this breathtaking technique he struck up the competition with Ter Borch and referred overtly to the latter’s painting discussed above and to a more recent work, Two Women Making Music, with a Page (cat. 3.3) of about 1657. Van Mieris used the arrangement of the figures in the latter painting – the page coming in with a tray and the lute-playing woman transformed into a young man – but inserted the standing woman of Ter Borch’s earlier painting, not only exaggerating the Ter Borchian elegance, but also displaying an even more miraculous effect of shimmering satin. He also retained the velvet-covered chair in the foreground. Van Mieris emphasised the sinuousness of the woman’s figure by placing her against a light, geometric background dominated by straight verticals, an innovation that was entirely different from Ter Borch’s manner of setting off a brightly illuminated figure against a dark background.

When choosing the subject – a woman before a keyboard instrument – Van Mieris also returned to a tradition that was well known from earlier prints (see cat. 26). This aspect of the painting, however, was not meant to demonstrate recognisable connections to specific sources, though the wit with which he raised the motif to a new theme entirely suitable for a Ter Borchian type of picture obviously strongly appealed to connoisseurs and colleagues, given the number of paintings with this subject that would follow. These included Dou’s Woman at the Clavichord (cat. 4.4) of about 1665.

It was only around this time, rather late in his career, that Dou began depicting ‘Ter Borchian’ young ladies dressed in satin seated in wealthy interiors. Dou integrated this figure type into his signature format. He aligned the figure and the main objects on the margin of a strong beam of light coming from a large window on the left, which flows diagonally through the space towards the foreground and leaves a large part of the interior in the dark. The viewer’s entrance to this space is defined by a stone arch. As in several of Dou’s paintings of the late 1650s and 1660s, the stone window frame has been opened up so that the admiring viewer, the lover who is invited to play a virtual duet with this young beauty, can enter the wondrous world of the fine painter – a world revealed by the drawn tapestry. She addresses the viewer, thus making the invitation to join her direct. We know that this work hung among twenty-seven paintings by Dou that were owned by burgomaster Johan de Bye in Leiden. An advertisement in the Haarlemsche Courant and Balthasar de Monconys’s diary both record that they were on view in a house in Leiden’s Breeze.

Vermore contended in his turn with both Van Mieris and Dou when he took up the subject of the woman at a keyboard instrument late in his career. In Young Woman Standing at a Virginal (cat. 4.5) he responded to Van Mieris’s Duet, while Young Woman Seated at a Virginal (cat. 4.4) refers directly to Dou’s Woman at the Clavichord. The standing musician’s natural pose and proportions seem to comment on Van Mieris’s over-stylised elegance. The strict geometry of a light-filled background, an innovative feature in Van Mieris’s painting,
is here pushed to its limits. In contrast to many of his aloof women, Vermeer enhanced the
directness of the confrontation between the young woman and the viewer, which is also seen
in Dou's Woman at the Clavichord. To underline this, Vermeer ingeniously inserted into the
painting of the standing woman the old motif of Venus and Cupid, who both address and
entice the beholder (fig. 27). He updated the theme by transforming this familiar pair into
an earthly Venus and a painting of Cupid hanging behind her.

The art lover is, however, not only tempted to fall in love with these two women, but
is especially challenged to compare the hugely different techniques with which Vermeer,
Van Mieris and Dou rendered illusion. The spectacular sheen of the satin of the skirts
and sleeves and the soft lustre of the chair's blue velvet in Young Woman Standing at a
Virginal beg comparison with Van Mieris's technique. In Young Woman Seated at a Virginal
the glossy satin of the dress, the polish of the violin's wood and the heavy wooliness of the
colourful tapestry invite measurement against Dou's manner of painting. More radically
than before, Vermeer displays the contrast of his manner with the descriptive finesse of
the two Leiden painters. Vermeer's rejection of detail in favour of the optical appearance
of reflected light, conveyed through flat areas of different gradations of light and shade
placed next to each other, could not differ more strongly from the uncanny modulations
of colour and tone expressed through imperceptible brushstrokes in Van Mieris's
imitation of silk.73

In Vermeer and Dou's paintings of women seated at a keyboard instrument, the
blue satin of the women's costume falls into small pleats and seems to be of a somewhat
thinner silk than in the other paintings. Dou manages to suggest the warp and weft of the
material through an extremely fine technique of painting with tiny short lines applied with
remarkable dexterity. Vermeer responded to this by depicting all surfaces slightly out of
focus and making the flatness and angularity of his planes of colour even more conspicuous.
Equally eye-catching is the great difference in the rendering of the heavy tapestry with its
design of leaves, fruits and geometric ornaments. A connoisseur such as Monconys would
have marvelled at how each strove for a convincing illusion: Dou's virtuoso description of
every detail of the texture of the rendered materials and Vermeer's brilliancy in suggesting
the optical effect of it.

These are only a few examples to demonstrate how artists were acutely aware of their
colleagues' activities and responded self-consciously to each other's work in order to show
connoisseurs their ingenuity in employing these motifs. Each of them displayed his individual
characteristics in figure types, arrangements, ways of suggesting space, and manner of
painting, creating a dissimilar similarity and inviting comparison. Simultaneously, each of
these artists saw to it that his works were immediately recognisable as a Ter Borch, a Dou, a
Van Mieris, a Steen, a Metsu or a Vermeer. Discriminating connoisseurs formed the critical
foundation that made the astonishingly high quality of this entire performance possible.

By pointing out similarities and differences between the works, they demonstrated that
they belonged to the select group of Konst-vroede Liefhebbers ('experienced art lovers').74
Not only could they appreciate this rivalry and value such quality, but they were also eager
to pay for it.