EMOTIONS: PAIN AND PLEASURE IN DUTCH PAINTINGS OF THE GOLDEN AGE

by Gary Schwartz and Machiel Keestra

Reviewed by Amy Ione, director, The Diatrope Institute, Berkeley, CA U.S.A. Email: cione@diatrope.com.

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Despite how intertwined emotions are with our lives, we cannot definitively say what they are either scientifically or contextually. The complexity of this concept has long been captured in Emotions: Pain and Pleasure in Dutch Paintings of the Golden Age, a catalog that accompanied an exhibition at the Frans Hals Museum in 2014-2015. A carefully constructed book, it includes an introduction to the subject by Ann Demeyer (the director of the Frans Hals Museum), informative essays by Gary Schwartz and Machiel Keestra, a fully annotated descriptive catalog for the exhibition and an overview of an interactive Emolab installation that accompanied the show while it was on view. The sum total offers a perspective on emotions in art and science that covers a broad range while successfully placing their depiction within both the Dutch Golden Age and our own time. Anyone who has tried to weave a far-reaching statement together with a narrowly defined topic knows how perilous this kind of aspiration is. In this case, I applaud their results.

The project’s success was no doubt due to a careful crafting of elements. Schwartz’s essay makes the point that our current views of 17th-century art (or the Dutch Golden Age) often fail to capture how important the expression of emotions was to the artists of that time. As he notes, if our tendency is to associate the art of that era with domesticity, intimacy and the quiet enjoyment of material pleasures an artist like Vermeer might convey, contemporary viewers wanted to experience emotions when they look at paintings. He then argues this point by combining his reading of historical science, philosophical and artistic approaches to the subject so as to convey that Dutch work does indeed express a range of emotions. After reading the book, I realized how little thought I had given to the emotional triggers in many of the brook, spiritual and religious narratives I identify with Dutch art of that time. In addition, as I looked at the emotional range within this volume, it was clear that the Dutch art of the Golden Age is worth reevaluating in terms of Schwartz’s arguments. Moreover, having a show that excavates this range at the Frans Hals Museum underscored Hals’s particular gifts in this area, as works like his well-known Laughing Cavalier remind us.

One excellent element of the catalog was the way the book’s commentary compares and contrasts the art historical examples with the views of broadly known figures outside of art (such as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas). Many Dutch writers less well known globally are also mentioned as well. Thus, we learn that the Dutch artists of this time would have known and used the work of people like Karel van Mander and Franciscus Junius. If broad-based source materials aid Schwartz in showing how artists integrated the ideas of their time with their presentations of emotionuality, it is also worth noting that he explains that many of our popular generalizations about 17th-century thinkers are actually mischaracterizations, further complicating our analyses of individual contributions. For example, writing about Descartes (1596-1650), who lived in the Netherlands from 1629 to 1649, Schwartz says:

Descartes’s reputation as a hard-headed proponent of a strict dualism, in which our bodies function as machines, stands in the way of understanding his ideas about the emotions. The translator into Dutch of his book, Theo Verbeek, puts it this way: “We have passions exactly because we are not machines, which is to say that we are free. Passions are the price that we pay for our freedom, and this price, to Descartes, can never be too high. All in all, it is the passions that make us truly human. All good and evil in life depends on them.” (p. 14) [1].

Organizing emotions around several themes further adds cohesion to the expansive effort. Selected paintings were grouped to convey Suffering and Despair; Mourning; Lust and Desire; Fear, Fright, and Amazement; Rage and Revenge; Regret and Disappointment; Rapture, Love, Joy and Delight. Chronological elements complemented the thematic groupings. Schwartz asserts that there was an apparent decline in the intensity of emotional display over time. “What was normal in the mid-sixteenth century [when the exhibitions start], would have seemed weird and exaggerated to artists and audiences of 1700” (p. 37). Although I have no reason to dispute this, it seems that the emotions were high throughout the catalog, so I’m not precisely sure that the Reformation’s antagonism toward holy images is as evident as the statement seems to suggest. That said, Schwartz does mention the Council of Trent (1545-1563) resolutions to “repress the turbulent emotions of desire [and] to subject our sensual appetites to the voice of reason” (p. 51) as one contemporary influence.

I found certain sections of the book more thought-provoking than others, and I imagine each reader will weigh the segments differently as each brings his or her own research interests and/or points of puzzle to the volume. In my case, I was drawn to the discussion on the difference between actual portraits and tronies because I am fascinated by the research challenge in explaining generalized perspectives on emotion in a way that fully applies to any particular individual. Artists, unlike statisticians, seem in a better position to meet the challenge of how we bring common and individual traits together and thus convincingly speak about our uniqueness even when making generic or universal pronouncements. More precisely, in art a tronie is a character study that

offers a generic statement through using an unnamed person to present a certain type of character rather than a particular individual. Tronies thus offer—and offered artists of the Dutch Golden Age—a means to portray individuals in the throes of emotion with a lack of specificity precisely because they did not endeavor to represent a particular person.

A few examples of tronies included in this exhibition catalog are *The Mulatto* (c. 1628) by Frans Hals and Judith Leyster's *Peelharing* (Mister Pickled Herring, 1639). Schwartz claims the value of this kind of broad coding device is twofold. Since the norm was to suppress emotions in portraits of specific individuals in an effort to achieve a dignified likeness, the tronie offered an opportunity to make an alternative type of portrait. That said, and the book notes this as well, some painters (e.g. Rembrandt) did capture their sitters in actions that seemed to include their feelings in the representations.

Group paintings and double portraits also seem to include more evident emotion, as the book's 1639 example of Hals's *Officers and Sergeants of the George Civic Guard* shows. Rembrandt's *Night Watch* isn't discussed, but I wondered if it further makes this point. Rembrandt added a number of extras characters to the 18 paid portraits for the work. The additions further animate the group and provide striking variations that liven up the portraits. The dynamic the added figures provide also help the viewer step into the narrative.

Commenting on the tension between an animated presentation and a static one is this volume's major accomplishment as it speaks to how a painting's narrative and emotional detail work in tandem. We see that compositions frequently tell political, moralistic, Biblical or mythological stories. Even when there is no obvious story at first glance, emotional elements touch us on their own terms. It is also striking to see how a narrative's emotional elements help interweave disparate topics. For example, sexual invocations and moralistic messages frequently accompany the emotional content. "Susanna and the Elders" was a popular theme and, according to Schwartz, more common than sacrificial practices. Even as the catalog focused on works that were in the exhibition, some that were not included were mentioned to further remind the reader of how adeptly artists mixed Biblical and mythological content for emotional themes. *The Blinding of Samson* (Rembrandt, 1656) and *Prometheus Bound, His Liver Being Pecked Out by an Eagle* (Rubens, 1611/12–1618) offer two examples.

Maclii Keestra's essay on the expression of emotions in art and science offers a nice complement to Schwartz's contribution. Using Aristotle and the Ancient Greeks as a launching point, the essay moves to Darwin and then contemporary research. Keestra argues:

Darwin's theory of the specific and functional expressions of emotions has to a significant extent determined modern research into emotions and the accompanying behaviors. A very important component of his thesis is that emotions do not simply add color to our experiences, they are also a crucial link between an animal (or person) and their environment (p. 93).

His focus on Darwinian thinking did present a parallel orientation to the Schwartz essay, but I would have liked more in-depth discussion about how the biological thrust of Darwinism changed our relationship to our bodies and emotions. If, as Keestra notes, Darwin's theory has determined the direction of modern research, does this impact the paintings put together when it was assumed that our emotions and bodies spoke emphatically about God's design? This question accentuates the importance of how we evaluate historical context when engaging with the topic in relation to contemporary art and science critiques. Moreover, as the authors point out, how we balance context in relation to fixed neural patterns is captured when we look at our changing views of the art. For example, as noted above, Schwartz, an art historian, asserts in the book that interpreters tend to associate the art of the 17th century with domesticity, intimacy and the quiet enjoyment of material pleasures, whereas there is in fact a large body of depictions of high emotions in varied contexts. While this book offers some corrective material, it also is part of a larger trend that is now updating earlier histories.

In terms of the current trends, I wish they had more fully developed our changing relationship to emotions, pleasures and pain over time in medical and technological terms. A few paintings grouped in the Suffering and Despair section serve as a good example of an element that could have received more attention in this regard. In terms of technological advancements, one work, Jan Steen's painting of *The Tooth-Puller* (1651), ably shows how times have changed our emotional relationship to dentistry [2], Steen depicts 17th-century procedures. The catalog notes: "Whether physical pain should be considered an emotion is the subject of old philosophical debate and new neuroscientific research" (p. 114). While it is obvious that the patient is in agony, it is also clear that this tooth extraction, the prevailing form of dentistry then, is far from the anesthetized, sterilized environment of today.

Similarly, it seems that the interpretation of *The Removal of a Stone in the Head (Allegory of Touch)* (c. 1623) is underdeveloped. Here the authors missed an opportunity to link the allegorical, biological and contextual themes together. This painting, from Rembrandt's allegory of the senses series, is among the earliest known works by the artist. It shows that even in his teens Rembrandt already had a genius for representing human character and emotion—and for packing amazing amounts of detail into his renderings.

The painting itself shows a barber-surgeon operating on a man who is cringing with pain. This patient is also clenching his fists as a lancet is inserted into his scalp [3]. Schwartz
speaks of the painting's ability to depict a powerful manifestation of a physical sensation that ignited an extreme negative feeling and claims that the treatment he is receiving is a moot point because having a stone in one's head means being out of one's mind. He tells us that the removal of the stone was a popular device for illustrating human folly. I'm not exactly sure when the literature began to associate this particular work with stone operations in terms of human folly, but I find the association misplaced or incomplete in this instance in light of what we know about medical treatments at that time. Unlike the obvious allegorical connotations presented in a work like Bosch's *Extraction of the Stone of Madness* (c. 1494) [4], the Rembrandt work seems more fully along the lines of a typical 17th-century medical operation/environment.

This work's possible medical context is further supported by other Rembrandt works like the recently discovered fourth painting in that Rembrandt series on the senses, *Unconscious Patient (Allegory of Smell)* (c. 1624–1625). Like the *Allegory of Touch*, the work on smell seems to demonstrate that these narratives operate on many levels. The young man in the *Allegory of Smell* appears to have fainted. This is shown by the painter having a heavily wrinkled woman holding a cloth with smelling salts under his nose in the hope of reviving him. The man's pale forearm suggests that his unconscious state might be due to a bloodletting procedure, another procedure typical of that era. The bearded man on the left is probably the barber-surgeon, and the recently cleaned work now also shows his surgical instruments hanging on the back wall. Since Rembrandt produced many works within medical environments—for example his visceral group portrait of anatomy lessons (those of Dr. Deijman and Dr. Tulp)—it seems likely that the *Allegory of Touch* simply uses a medical scene and depicts the pain that accompanied a typical procedure of that era.

Unfortunately, I missed the exhibition and thus this review loses some of the project's flavor. One component of the actual show mentioned in the book that I am sure deserves more attention is the Emolab that accompanied the exhibition. Here visitors had an opportunity to test their impressions of emotional expressions against images in which bodies, faces and contexts were presented in manipulated combinations. Thus visitors could compare their own feelings with the digital “opinions” of psychological programs. Similarly, the catalog encourages the reader to ask what an emotion is and how we experience/explain emotional reality. In doing so, this catalog does a good job in aiding readers as they address the possibilities of the philosophical, religious and political narratives. I wish that historical medical and scientific practices were more broadly addressed, but of course one can only do so much in any one project. It is a worthy effort and definitely one that has broad appeal due to the subject matter.

References

1. Descartes wrote: "Finally, the machine of our body is constructed in such a way that a single thought of joy or love or the like is sufficient to send the animal spirits through the nerves into all the muscles needed to cause the different movements of the blood which, as I said, accompany the passions. It is true that I found difficulty in working out the movements peculiar to each passion, because the passions never occur singly; nevertheless, since they occur in different combinations, I tried to discover the changes that occur in the body when they change company." René Descartes, "Discourse on the Method," in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume 3, The Correspondence*, J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff and D. Murdoch, eds. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991).

2. See <https://www.mauritshuis.nl/en/explore/the-collection/artworks/the-tooth-puller-
63/>.

3. The images that compose the series are available at <http://www.ashmolean.org/exhibitions/sensation/about/>. The four known works are *The Three Musicians (Allegory of Hearing)*, *The Stone Operation (Allegory of Touch)*, *The Spectacle Seller (Allegory of Sight)* and the recently discov-