

# Nit-Picking in the Golden Age of Dutch Art

Brenda Johansen

Department of Defense Dependent Schools, Unit 15549

Seoul, Korea

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In seventeenth century Dutch Republic, becoming a wife and mother were the pinnacle of achievement for a woman, regardless of her social class. Once the woman was a wife, she and her husband understood full well that when the children began to join the family, the wifely role of helpmeet to her husband would be subordinated to the grander role of mother to their children. During the Dutch Golden Age, it was the mother, not the father, who was expected to be the moral compass for their offspring. While a wife would of course continue to support her husband's endeavors on behalf of the family and the state, her true womanly success would reveal itself in the caliber of citizens her adult children proved to be. A mother's dedication to her children and her exceptionally clean and ordered home mirrored the values of the Dutch Republic. The female as the "paragon of virtue" was not a new idea during the era of the Republic, with all its stops and starts in political and religious matters. The "paragon of virtue" notion was conceived on a continuum of evolution in social and political arenas beginning with the Aristotelian rhetoric, and was readily adopted by early Dutch moralists. The Dutch belief that women were viewed "as the weaker sex who confine their duties to the home while men function in the world at large," was wholly substantiated during the Golden Age of fruitful exploration and strengthening international trade. Nonetheless, a woman's duties in the home were not taken lightly by their menfolk. Women were recognized as a vital link in the success of The Netherlands as a growing world player in the seventeenth century. The myriad of responsibilities placed at the door of a woman may have been confined to what took place within the walls of her own home, but the highly educated Dutch

population understood full well that well-raised children equated to well-prepared adults in an ever growing competitive world market.

It is perhaps a result of these culturally accepted beliefs that “the Dutch were indeed fixated on their children to a degree and in a manner arrestingly unlike other European cultures of the time.” The art and literature of the day speaks volumes about the Dutch preoccupation with the woman’s role in society as it is defined by her role as a wife and mother. Social moralists produced pamphlets and books with minute details in both words and illustrations, all designed to educate women as to their inherent responsibilities as mothers, wives, and homemakers in the Republic. The moralizing was complete with warnings of the horrific consequences to a woman’s soul, and the souls of those in her charge, should she fail in her maternal duties. But it was the artists of the day, not the writers, who captured the subtle lessons of goodness taught at a mother’s knee. The genre of narrative family art during the Golden Age of Dutch Art encompasses the mundane, the perilous, and the grandiloquence of motherhood. The many paintings dedicated to the theme of motherly duties meticulously records the belief that women were expected to create in their homes the most desired commodities in Dutch society: cleanliness and order. The home was viewed as the first line of defense against the wily ways of the world; the home was the refuge where children were to be instructed in the spirit of affection and comfort; the home was to be a place of cleanliness and order where children could grow to be Dutch citizens who were socially compliant (to which ever way the winds were blowing) and fiscally productive (on an international level if you please).

During this period in Dutch history there was an absence of patronage art so artists were often left to their own devices to create art to reflect the expectations imposed by the pulse of social, religious, and political leaders of the day. As such, the art output evolved into various types of genre paintings dictated by the paying

consumer base. For the first time in European history, the general public was just as apt to buy a picture for their home as were the well-to-do; this new and invigorating concept set the world of original art into overdrive. A clever artist who hit upon a theme that pleased the masses was in a position to ensure himself of a steady, if moderate, income. Social moralizing was big business at this time and many an artist jumped on the bandwagon. Artists used their paintings to teach; or in some cases, to preach, to society at large, but to the “lesser sex” in particular. Family genre paintings by artists we know by name, such as Gerard ter Hooch, Jan Steen and Pieter de Borch, revealed in living color the immense responsibilities of wives, mothers, and housekeepers ensconced in a society obsessed with cleanliness and order. When a woman’s job was done properly, the pictures reflected the natural results of her faithful labors by portraying immaculate surroundings, serene children, satisfied husbands and a sense of sublime tranquility. If, however, she were too lax in her dealings, or if she participated in the vices of life by selfishly indulging in drinking, smoking, or “sleeping on the job,” then the mother’s dereliction of duty was relentlessly detailed by the artist’s brush. Her failings were there for all the world to see, along with multiple symbolic warnings of the ensuing chaos and familial disharmony that were about to befall her poor unsuspecting family.

Although most seventeenth century Dutch family-group paintings include children, children were not the focus of the instructive intent of the art. While it was recognized that children were not yet capable of being independent, it was also not yet widely accepted that children were entitled to a carefree childhood existence. In the seventeenth century, childhood was still considered the path to adulthood; in other words, a child was just a smaller version of an adult. The idea of a childhood unfettered by worldly cares was just becoming a viable concept, but it had not yet reached full societal acceptance, especially in circumstances where

children contributed to the livelihood of the family. It, therefore, fell to parents, especially mothers, to see to it that their children were prepared to become morally upright adults and contributing members to society, an expectation that began early in a little one's life. With this attitude towards children, it is easy to follow the logic that art featuring a mother and child was not concerned with the mother-child relationship, but rather it was a description of the expectation that women are the ideal nurturers of little Dutch citizens. For several seventeenth century Dutch artists, what better way then to demonstrate dedication to the duties of cultivators of the nation than by that most basic of exercises in cleanliness and order-- nit-picking.

The motif of nit-picking in both art and literature played a critical role in espousing the role of women in early modern Europe: The ultimate message being that women lived in a patriarchal society and their duties were confined to the home--namely husband, children, and housekeeping--it doesn't get much nit-pickier than that. "Family literature corroborates the existence of general ideals as well as specific ideas about women and domesticity as expressed through art." It is not surprising then that the most often depicted role of women in words as well as pictures, is of a mother who raises brilliantly clean children-- both inside and out. After all, the rational expectation is that physically and morally clean children will eventually grow to be hearty, loyal, contributing citizens to the nation. And the ever-present theme of cleanliness was best presented in the tedious task of delousing. Lice-infested heads were a fact of life in the seventeenth century, no matter what your social standing, so delousing was both necessary and common. In art, delousing, or nit-picking, was used as a metaphor for all types of human conditions, including those of the body, of the mind, and even of the soul. Delousing, like keeping the family home and a child's mind spotless, was the expectation for every self-respecting woman in the Dutch Republic.

Jacob Cats, one of the most widely read moralistic rhetoricians of the age, was unabashed in his didactic messages about one's duty to maintain physical, mental, and moral cleanliness. His were rather simplistic and transparent allegorical stories and poems, including this one, in which he instructs his readers do their literal duty of combing their hair to rid it of lice, but also to:

*Comb, comb, again and again, and not the  
hair alone, but also all that hides within,  
until the inner bone.*

Cats goes on to warn his readers of how the depraved senses “when left uncombed” will result in “sinful hair” gone wild and then no “purifying comb” will ever be able to tame it. Thus, in such a state, with no “pure foundation” of one “whose head and heart are once saved,” the poor uncombed wretch is destined to a life of misery and spiritual doom. Cats even warns that everything the uncombed “touches is a filthy mess,” so “you comb everyday, that is best for your body.”

Certainly not all contemporary mothers had access to Cats' writings, but they were well aware of its message and their responsibilities to their family and the state. They would have known that although the “pedagogues and moralists charged parents with the care of the physical needs of their offspring, their obligations, did not end there.” Parents, especially mothers, no matter what their social standing, were responsible for raising clean and honorable citizens; therefore, mothers must be ever vigilant, lest their “neighborhood watch” find them resembling the popular pun of the day by Johan de Brune which stated, “Lazy mother, lousy kids.”

While Cats wrote his descriptive delousing verse for both men and women, pictures depicting the actual act of nit-picking show the task as exclusively women's work. However, every artist who created such a scene infused his work with a sense of dignity and familial serenity that is ultimately centered in the



*A Mother's Duty* by Pieter de Hooch, 1658-60, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

woman. Some scenes of delousing are so subtle in their presentation, and yet so powerful in their implication, that the viewer is not always aware of what is really taking place. According to a guide at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, a scenario that is often played out at the museum illustrates this point. A visitor perusing the galleries gives a passing glance at a painting entitled, *A Mother's Duty*, by the seventeenth century Dutch artist, Pieter de Hooch. She plausibly assumes that the mother named in the title, who is seated in a typical middling-class Dutch home of the era, is bent over the genteel and ever-present female task of sewing or lace

making. However, as the viewer comes closer to the painting and inspects the artwork more carefully, she is surprised to discover that the “the woman is absorbed by a rather prosaic task: delousing her child’s hair.” What she sees is a child who apparently kneels submissively in front of her mother with her head in her mother’s lap. Her mother is intently scouring her child’s head, searching out and cleaning the lice from her hair. At first glance the little girl is almost indefinable, in part because of De Hooch’s innovative use of light and shadow, but more so because she is so inextricably connected to her mother by the intimate nature of the task. De Hooch has given the unsavory job of delousing its own sense of gravity and layered it with a subdued sense of respectability.

The museum visitor then allows her eye to take in the entire painting again; now she sees the backlit sunbeams in the rear of the room. The rays of light seem to emphasize the great care this mother takes in maintaining a home worthy of the great Dutch Republic. The somewhat lived in space in the foreground shows the comfortable demeanor of her home; the mother and child are surrounded by a panoramic of a perfectly tidy living space: a snug box bed, a gleaming tile floor in spite of the dog who appears to have free reign, the child’s cap flung off in preparation for the quiet nit-picking and the baby’s essential “kak” chair.

The painting of a *Mother’s Duty* leaves the viewer with a sense of the virtuous domestic touches this woman brings to her home, but more importantly, the central figure is seen as a woman who looks after her children as meticulously as she looks after her house. These sentiments of cleanliness and order would be plainly evident to the museum visitor had she been correct in her first assumption that the picture showed a mother busy sewing or making lace. But der Hooch’s subject is not engaged in such genteel work--she is in fact picking at nits. It is this stark reality that makes the artist’s ability to show the overarching sense of cleanliness and order encompassed in this home that makes this motif in paintings

all the more spectacular and intriguing.

Social class, either up the ladder or down, did not excuse a wife and mother from society's expectations towards her domestic duties. Savvy contemporary artists shared this insight with their respective social audiences. Even in the wealthiest of homes, a mother's duty is lovingly carried out, as seen in the painting by Caspar Netscher, *Woman Combing a Child's Hair*. Although the delousing chore is given a more genteel title, the task is the same; we see yet again a child passively submitting to the ritual of having his hair "combed" by his mother. But this mother is elegantly dressed and surrounded not by bed boxes and "kat" chairs, but by exquisite gold-gilded furniture and waiting servants. Another child in the scene, left to her own devices, points to a mirror, making a face not at all becoming a young lady. Alas, while her mother is preoccupied with ridding the girl's brother of his pests, she flaunts the opportunity to be a bit impish in the looking glass while no one is looking. Perhaps this is why this painting was subtitled, "For Learning and Entertainment" in a 1976 exhibition catalogue. It is the assertion of the exhibition curator that Netscher's painting was so sophisticated, even given its distasteful theme, that all the "pedagogical symbolism" it contains was obviously intended for an "audience skilled in habitually reading works of art in a particular manner." The "readers" of this art would see clearly, given their understanding of symbolism and allegorical references in art the obvious message: even while at the task of purifying one child, a mother must be ever vigilant and aware of what the other children are up to. Indeed, she must "purify oneself on a daily basis," and, recognizing that her children are the natural extension of herself, she must do the same for them. (This painting image was not downloadable from the internet, but can be found on page 129 of [Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in 17 Century Dutch Art](#), by Wayne E. Franits.)

Just as the rising bourgeois class was participating in the ongoing effort of setting a "pure foundation" by purifying daily with the comb, so too were the poor

and dispossessed. A rare find in the world of art is the pragmatic, yet tender rendering of the life of the poor in a painting by the Dutch artist, Gerard ter Borch. Ter Borch actually painted two pictures of a delousing scene, both of which are beautifully executed and profoundly “sympathetic but unsentimental.” The more revealing of the two paintings in regards to the societal expectations of Dutch women in all classes of the seventeenth century, is the painting entitled *The Stone Grinder’s Family*. Here the viewer encounters a poor, semi-skilled working class family going about the business of their daily lives. The father busily grinds an object at the large and cumbersome stone mill in the much maligned yard of their dilapidated house. Presumably the eldest son, stands close by, watching his father work the trade that will one day define his existence. But the men are not the center of der Borch’s painting; in fact, the men are seen only in the recesses of the background. The true focus of the painting is the scene in the foreground, the simple composition of domestic virtue between a weary-worn mother and a small child at her knee. The poor, drab mother sits outside her sad home in her unkempt yard with her child patiently leaning her head towards her; both are unperturbed, patiently going about the business at hand. A contemporary Dutch woman from the same social class looking at this painting would immediately understand that the woman’s task of delousing is just as unremitting as the man’s task of grinding. She would see that the man is destined to work thanklessly by the sweat of his brow, while the woman’s work of delousing is a necessary labor of love.

Ter Hooch shows how by doing this simple thing, this mother, who has so few material goods to offer, is doing what she can to ensure cleanliness and order in her child’s world. This intimate moment between the two, oblivious to the commotion around them, replicates that self-same moment taking place in the middling-class home with the well-polished tile floor or in the expensive home with the lavish dressing table. No matter what the setting, the



*The Stone Grinder's Family* by Gerard ter Hooch, 1651

task is the same, the characters are the same, the message is the same: it is a mother's duty, first and foremost, to see to her child's physical, mental and spiritual well being--it is nit-picking at its very best.

Gerard Der Borch, Pieter ter Hooch, Caspar Netscher, and other Golden Age Dutch artists, like Quiringh van Brekelenkam and Abraham de Pape, all painted scenes of women delousing children, scenes that sent a clear message that a "well-groomed outer appearance" equates to "inner virtue." This new "genrefied portrait" painting served to teach much more than it served to entertain. The role of mother was unmistakably portrayed as that of the caregiver and the keeper of the moral foundations of the home, and by extension, the nation. Historical research concludes that the use of children in these types of pictures "functions as commentators for or as embodiments of adult problems, vices or concerns." This commonsensical conclusion does not however diminish the understanding that

With their quite literal demonstration of the female place in society, it would be reductive to assume that these pictures simply reflected prevailing gender norms; such norms were not passively reflected but were actively and gracefully articulated in images that celebrate the virtues of home life with unparalleled beauty and subtlety (Sharma, p. 197).

Indeed, women in seventeenth century Dutch Republic were "actively and gracefully" acting out their assigned roles, and not simply as an assigned "gender norm"; but rather they acted as the dedicated, loving and devoted wives and mothers that they were. And sometimes, to keep a high degree of cleanliness and order in her world, a dedicated, loving and devoted wife and mother found it necessary to do a little nit-picking.

The following pictures show additional examples of the “nit-picking” genre during the Golden Age of Dutch Art.



*Woman Combing a  
Child's Hair (1648)*

**by Quiringh van  
Brekelenkam**



***Boy Ridding His Dog  
of Fleas (1651)***

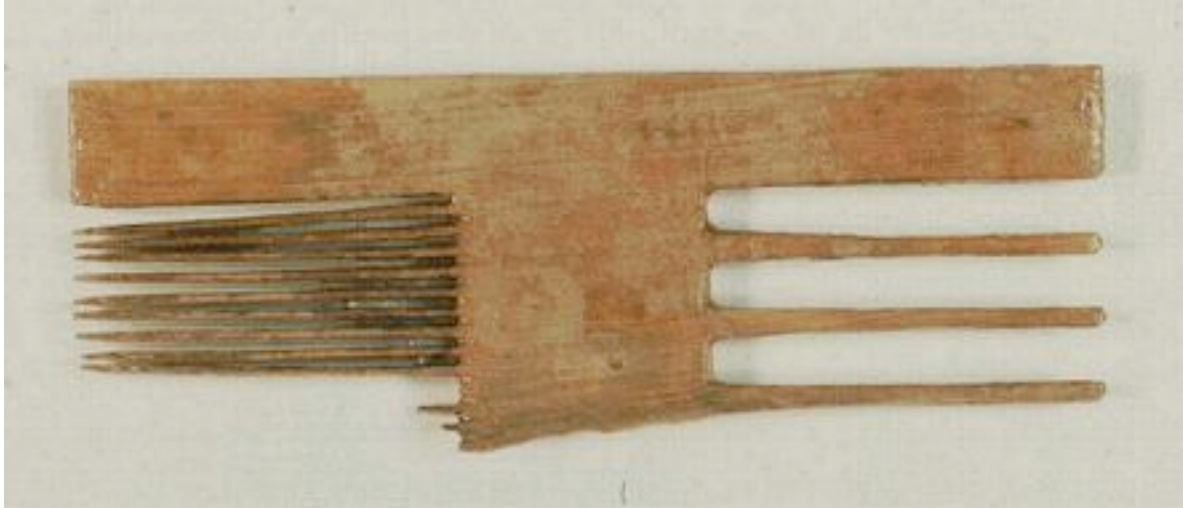
**by Gerard ter Borch**

Art historians often cite this painting as a quaint reflection of a child imitating the adult responsibility of grooming those over whom he has stewardship.



Portrait of Wieksen Matthys *Combing a Child's Hair* (1659)  
by Gerard ter Borch

(Mrs. Matthys is Borch's mother-in-law)



The smaller teeth of this 17th-century hair comb were used to remove lice.  
<http://www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc/mhcexh/musprv/prvidx.htm> Wheelock, Arthur K.  
"Book Review of Gerard Ter Borch, *Studies in the History of Art.*" Publishers Weekly 11 Oct. 2004: 59+.

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