The Morality Works of Jan Steen and William Hogarth:
A Comparative Study of Art in its Place and Time

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This project analyzes and compares a few important works of Dutch Golden Age painter Jan Steen and eighteenth century British artist, William Hogarth. The project consists of a written introduction to each artist and the milieu in which they worked, as well as a slide presentation that analyzes and compares the art of the artists in a format that will allow other teachers to use the presentation as a resource.

Jan Steen (1626-1679), who was a prodigious Dutch Golden Age genre painter, is well known for his biblical and historical paintings, but is also renowned for his wryly-humorous morality paintings. Steen, a tavern owner, artist and founder of St. Luke’s Guild in Leiden, lived in the Netherlands at a time of great prosperity and growth of the Dutch middle-class, which was tempered by a prevalent attitude of simplicity and frugality as promoted by the Reformed Church. As the Dutch middle class grew, those less fortunate were provided for by a social welfare system devised not so much out of Christian charity, as for the desire to avoid revolution and social discord. (Israel 355-56).

As Amy Chua points out, “By the mid-seventeenth century, the Dutch Republic was ‘indisputably the greatest trading nation in the world, with commercial outposts and fortified ‘factories’ scattered from Archangel to Recife and from New Amsterdam to Nagasaki.’ Incalculable quantities of luxury goods flowed into and through Holland” (157). This golden era was one of economic opportunity where “there were no limits on who could get rich,” of religious toleration and high wages “which attracted skilled and highly talented individuals from all over Europe,” and of intellectual liberty which attracted “some of the most brilliant thinkers
of the Enlightenment . . . Among these were René Descartes, Baruch Spinoza and John Locke . . .” (Chua 161-163).

Steen was a prolific artist, but so were his fellow Dutch painters. The Dutch painters of the seventeenth century produced five million paintings for a country of about five million people (Janson, “Art Market”). Steen’s morality paintings combine cultural value messages with a light-hearted nod to the foibles of human behavior. Steen imparts messages for being good parental role models, adhering to Dutch values and social norms and warns against the dangers of newfound wealth.

The seventeenth century is viewed as a Golden Age in the Netherlands, not only in the arts, but also for the country in general. The Netherlands was an economic powerhouse, but after the Peace of Utrecht in 1713, Dutch wealth declined (Antal, Place 1). England “slowly usurped and ultimately outstripped [the Netherlands] until her trade dominated the world . . . [and it] saw the slow, systematic and organic growth of the English middle class” (Antal, Place 1). Moreover, the “Dutch ‘Conquest’ of England” in 1688 as the Dutch stadtholder, William, Prince of Orange became King William III of Britain “marked the transfer of the mantle of world dominance from the Netherlands to Britain” (Chua 166). As Amy Chua notes, “it was England that would overwhelmingly benefit from the amalgamation of Dutch and English power. Basically the Dutch Republic exported its tolerance, its most enterprising [Jewish] financiers, and its entire ‘Business model’ to England, which the replaced the Dutch Republic as Europe’s most preeminent land of freedom and opportunity for immigrants and religious minorities . . . [and also] as the world’s supreme maritime power, presiding over a global . . . empire of unprecedented magnitude” (Chua 166-167).

William Hogarth (1697-1764) was an English painter, engraver and social and cultural critic. Raised in a family of marginal means, Hogarth’s early career involved silver engraving. Hogarth’s Britain was emerging from the political and religious strife of the seventeenth century, enjoying a commercial and imperial expansion and suffering from wars abroad and “turbulence and Jacobite revolts at home” (Uglow xi). Hogarth lived during the Enlightenment and the early Industrial Revolution and witnessed increased social problems related to the gulf between the haves and have-nots (Uglow xi-xiv).

Hogarth’s England was a place where consumption, even to excess, was celebrated almost as a civic duty (as for example in Bernard de Mandeville’s The Fable of the Bees (1723)),
“that would bring prosperity to all (‘Yet hence the Poor are clothed, the Hungry fed,’ as Pope assured Burlington)” (Uglow 173). DeVries connects the “industrious revolution” in England to the rise in consumption of luxury goods, as workers strove to demonstrate their new prosperity (255-256). Nevertheless, this assertion of trickle-down prosperity was no more that a vague dream. Hogarth’s London was one rife with social problems of poverty, alcoholism, prostitution and crushing personal debt. The Reformation left England without relief institutions provided by the Catholic Church in the past and the solutions offered often centered on poor houses and debtor’s prisons.

The art world of eighteenth century Britain threw off the shackles of continental influence and Hogarth led the rise of the British school of painting. Hogarth skewers the corrupting influences of the continent, the dangers of new wealth, and offers commentary on the social problems of poverty, prostitution and gin consumption, expressing middle-class feelings that honesty and industriousness are preferable to depravity (Antal 11).

The PowerPoint associated with this project provides analyses of the paintings as well as some historical and cultural context for the period during which the paintings were created. This project is in no way a comprehensive comparison of the artists’ works, but rather it is a starting point to an examination of the artists’ place and time and to better understand the milieu of their creations.

Works Cited


