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Peeping through the Keyhole: Leonaert Bramer's *Perspectyfkas*

Leonaert Bramer (1596–1674) is one of the most interesting Dutch artists of the Golden Age.[1] Although he operated alongside outstanding Delft painters such as Johannes Vermeer, Pieter de Hooch, Emanuel de Witte and Carel Fabritius, he does not quite fit into the group associated with the so-called Delft school. His fondness for composing night scenes, often unusual and bizarre subjects, and using thick layers of impasto distinguished him from the other local artists of his time. The painting *The Circumcision of Christ* from the National Museum in Warsaw is the best example of the type of works thanks to which Bramer perfectly appealed to the tastes of collectors (**fig. 1**).[2] Here, the artist assigned the most important role to the Holy Family and the group of priests gathered around the altar stone. Their importance is emphasized by the neutral background enlivened only by a shaft of light cast from above. At the same time the viewer's attention is drawn to the little landscape visible through the arcade on the right-hand side of the composition where standing out against the dark blue sky, among trees, one can see a fragment of a temple surmounted with sculptures. This painting shows Bramer's subtle use of Italianate motifs at a time when he had already achieved a high reputation amongst the Delft artists. The surviving inventories prove that in the 1630s and 1640s he was the most successful artist in the city. It is interesting, however, that Bramer's *œuvre* also includes works that prove that he shared at least a few areas of fascination with the above-mentioned artists.[3]

[1] For the most important publications concerning the artist: Heinrich Wichmann, *Leonaert Bramer. Sein Leben, und seine Kunst. Ein Betrag zur Geschichte der holländischen Malerei zur Zeit Rembrandts* (Leipzig: K. W. Hiersemann, 1923); *Leonaert Bramer, 1596–1674. A Painter of the Night*, Frima Fox Hofrichter, ed., with essays by Walter Liedtke, Leonard J. Slatkes, Arthur K. Wheelock, Jr., exh. cat., The Patrick and Beatrice Haggerty Museum of Art, Milwaukee, 4 December 1992 – 28 February 1993 (Milwaukee, Wisc.: The Patrick and Beatrice Haggerty Museum of Art at Marquette University, 1992); Jane ten Brink Goldsmith et al., *Leonaert Bramer, 1596–1674. Ingenious Painter and Draughtsman in Rome and Delft*, exh. cat., Stedelijk Museum Het Prinsenhof, Delft, 9 September – 13 November 1994 (Zwolle: Waanders Uitgevers; Delft: Stedelijk Museum Het Prinsenhof, 1994); Walter Liedtke, *A View of Delft. Vermeer and his Contemporaries* (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 2000); Walter Liedtke, Michiel C. Plomp, Axel Rüger, *Vermeer and the Delft School*, contrib. by Reinier Baarsen et al., exh. cat., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 8 March – 27 May 2001; The National Gallery, London, 20 June – 16 September 2001 (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001).

[2] 1640–1650, The National Museum in Warsaw. On the subject of the painting, see, i.a. Wichmann, op. cit., p. 110; *Rembrandt i jego krąg*, Jan Białostocki et al., eds, exh. cat., The National Museum in Warsaw, 15 March – 30 April 1956 (Warsaw: Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie, 1956), pp. 29–32, cat. no. 1; *Arcydzieła malarstwa holenderskiego XVII wieku ze zbiorów polskich*, exh. cat., Museum of Art, Łódź, November–December 1967 (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 1967), n.p., cat. no. 8; Jane ten Brink Goldsmith et al., *Leonaert Bramer, 1596–1674. Ingenious Painter...*, op. cit., pp. 170–1, cat. no. 47. For other works by Bramer in old Polish collections, see Michał Walicki, "Nieznane dzieło Leonaerta Bramera," *Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego*, vol. 2 (1957), pp. 707–18. Two other paintings from the National Museum in Warsaw were formerly associated with Bramer (*The Resurection of Lazarus* and *Jesus with the Possessed of Gadara*), although the authorship was rightly questioned. See Maria Kluk, "Wojciech Kolasiński (1852–1916). Painter, Conservator and Collector," *Bulletin du Musée National de Varsovie*, nº 1–4, XXXIX (1998), pp. 109–11.

[3] Walter Liedtke, "Delft Painting 'in Perspective:' Carel Fabritius, Leonaert Bramer, and the Architectural

The illusionism and perspective were adopted by Bramer in his large-scale works. The most outstanding and interesting examples of these were the decorations for the Delft Militia Company building called Nieuwe Doelen and in the Great Hall of Het Prinsenhof, where the imaginary world blended with the real space. These kinds of large-scale decorative undertakings were extremely rare in Holland.[4] For obvious reasons, the development of illusionary religious painting (such as, for example, frescoes and plafonds in Italian churches) was impossible. It should be remembered that Bramer did such projects, such as the drawing *Concert of Angels* (**fig. 2**) and its verso *Four Latin Fathers of the Church and Saints* at the British Museum in London.[5] Also the patronage of the House of Orange and of the municipal authorities did not provide many opportunities for these kinds of works. Nevertheless, as Susan Koslow writes, Dutch artists responded to the interest in perspective among domestic art connoisseurs in a different way, including developing a completely new "Dutch" art form – the perspective box which was called by Samuel van Hoogstraten in his treatise *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst* a "wonderlijke perspectyfkas."[6] Bramer's *œuvre* also includes works that employ this impressive way of using perspective, namely a group of drawings serving as projects for the interior of a perspective box, as well as decoration for its outer wall. Not only are they unique, but also there exist no other works of their type. A more detailed analysis reveals the originality of the concept behind them.

The first of them is a drawing, *The Curious Ones*, from about 1655–1660 (**fig. 3**).[7] It shows a group of people in front of a house, gathered around an intentionally enlarged keyhole. On the right, a seated woman with a baby smiles as she looks at the other figures. A couple is approaching from the left; the bearded man in a hat is pointing to the woman with bare shoulders to the hole in the door. In the middle, two people are trying to see what is going on, on the other side. The precision of the line, complemented by the subtle chiaroscuro wash, is in stark contrast to the fact that the drawing is executed on a few joined pieces of paper. That is why it should be assumed that it is a careful, preparatory study, and not a work for sale. It is now generally thought to be the design for an exterior panel of a *perspectyfkas*.[8]

and Townscape Painters from about 1650 Onward," in Liedtke, Plomp, Rüger, *Vermeer and the Delft School*, op. cit., pp. 99–129.

4 Here, should be mentioned the most important decorations – Oranjenzaal in Huis ten Bosch and paintings for the Amsterdam City Hall.

5 They were probably created as a project of the ceiling decorations for the clandestine churches in Delft or nearby towns. Liedtke, Plomp, Rüger, *Vermeer and the Delft School*, op. cit., pp. 454–5, cat. no. 105 (Michiel C. Plomp).

6 Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst* (Dordrecht: Fransois van Hoogstraeten, 1678), pp. 274–5; see Susan Koslow, "De wonderlijke Perspectyfkas. An Aspect of Seventeenth Century Dutch Painting," *Oud Holland*, 82 (1967), p. 35; see also David Bomford, "Perspective, Anamorphosis, and Illusion. Seventeenth-Century Dutch Peep-Shows," in *Vermeer Studies*, Ivan Gaskell and Michiel Jonker, eds (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art; New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 124–35. Studies in the History of Art, 55, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, Symposium Papers, 33.

7 1655–1660, Museum Kunstpalast mit Sammlung der Kunstakademie (NRW), Düsseldorf.

8 Walter Liedtke put forward this hypothesis (*A View of Delft...*, op. cit., p. 23; Liedtke, Plomp, Rüger, *Vermeer and the Delft School*, op. cit., p. 127); it should, however, be noticed that Michiel C. Plomp, while accepting Liedtke's proposition, upheld his own, i.e., that the drawing could have been the design for a wall decoration, and the hole in the centre was supposed to be a small window into another room, or to the outside of the building (Liedtke, Plomp, Rüger, *Vermeer and the Delft School*, op. cit., p. 458, cat. no. 108). Antoni Ziemba is also in favour of acknowledging the drawing as the design for an outer panel of a perspective box (*Iluzja a realizm. Gra z widzem w sztuce holenderskiej 1580–1680*, Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2005, p. 173).

The drawing is distinct from any other preserved exterior panel decoration of the perspective boxes. Two of them imitate a chest of drawers that contained small works of art or naturalia held in *kunstkasten* (collectors' cabinets). We can see this type of *trompe-l'œil* on the face of a small wooden box depicting the *Interior of a Protestant Church*, where the pulled-out drawers reveal precious objects.[9] The box from the Detroit Institute of Arts is also decorated in the same way.[10] Such an illusionary depiction of detailed elements was to encourage the viewer to look through a hole placed in the middle, revealing – to his surprise – not the trinkets inside the drawers, but the interior of a church or a palace. Three side panels of a box by Samuel van Hoogstraten in the National Gallery in London are decorated with the following allegories: *Love of Art*, *Love of Wealth*, *Love of Fame*. Are they representing the "impulses" that drove the artist (who depicted himself on the three sides in front of easels) to make the work? Should the viewer looking through each hole realise that the work was thoughtfully designed out of a love of art (and thus a knowledge of its rules), and was to make the author rich and famous? The anamorphosis on the top of the box, depicting Venus and Cupid, announces the masterful use of perspective within.[11]

Bramer's sketch is neither a *trompe-l'œil* nor an allegory; instead it simply shows a common genre scene outside a Dutch house. The representation is just what it is; it neither deceives the eye nor attempts to trick the viewer, and pretends that it is something more. And yet, in spite of the apparent simplicity of the subject, Bramer invites the viewer to engage in a sophisticated game. We do not need to guess what is going on behind the closed doors, which seem to be so interesting to the onlookers. The figures are drawn around a keyhole in such a formation that allows room for another, this time a real, voyeur. Just like the others, we can bend down, and stealthily take a peep to satisfy our own curiosity.

Closer analysis of the depicted figures shows that they are not behaving in the same way. Not all of them are interested in what is going on behind the door or are amused by the possibility of taking a peep. Two men draw attention in particular, as they are both pointing to the keyhole. The one on the right – tastefully dressed, with a fashionable moustache and beard – is smiling gently, and he seems to encourage a kneeling woman next to him to look. His gesture can also be interpreted as a request for silence, so that their presence is not revealed to those being spied on. On the contrary, the face of the older man does not betray any expression of amusement. We may presume that he is surprised or even disgusted at what can be seen behind the door. We may also wonder if his negative reaction is caused by the very fact of voyeurism. He is pointing to the keyhole with his left hand, but at the same time he is trying to stop the approaching woman. She pushes him aside, probably wanting to take a look inside as well. Bramer's juxtaposition of those attitudes intrigues the viewer, who wonders what it is that amuses some and disgusts others.

As William W. Robinson points out, in many seventeenth-century genre paintings some of the figures play the role of "extrovert bystanders" who invite the viewers to contemplate and

[9] Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen. This box, together with the peep show with the interior of a Catholic church, is attributed to Hendrick van Vliet. See Olaf Koester, *Illusions. Gijsbrechts, Royal Master of Deception*, with contrib. by Celeste Brusati et al., trans. by W. Glynn Jones, exh. cat., Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, 24 September – 30 December 1999 (Copenhagen: Statens Museum for Kunst, 1999), pp. 278–83, cat. nos 57 and 58 (with earlier literature).

[10] Koslow, op. cit., p. 53.

[11] Inside Van Hoogstraten depicted the seemingly empty interior of a patrician house. For its interpretation, see Ziemba, op. cit., pp. 174–6 and note 409 (with earlier literature).

evaluate the depicted scene.[12] Showing this kind of figures comes from an Early Renaissance tradition. It was recommended by Leon Battista Alberti in his treaty written in Latin, *De Pictura* (*On Painting*) from 1435; Italian edition – *Della pittura* – was prepared by him a year later: "[...] I like there to be someone in the 'historia' who tells the spectators what is going on, and either beckons them with his hand to look, or with ferocious expression and forbidding glance challenges them not to come near, as if he wished their business to be secret, or points to some danger or remarkable thing in the picture, or by his gestures invites you to laugh or weep with them."[13] Their gestures or facial expressions indicate the correct reading of the work's moral message. This seems to be exactly the role of the main figure in Nicolaes Maes's *The Idle Servant* (**fig. 4**).[14] The mistress of the house, standing in the middle of the composition, looks at the viewers with an ironic smile. Her gesture, used by seventeenth-century rhetoricians when presenting proof in support of their arguments,[15] draws the viewer's attention to the servant's sloppiness.[16] The dishes left around on the floor and the cat stealing meat (prepared for the diners seen in the background) indicate her indolence. Due to the narrative and compositional similarities and the short span of time in which they were created,[17] the group of other Maes's paintings showing eavesdroppers are considered works bearing a similar didactic message.[18] They have been the subject of many interpretations.[19] The figures looking at the viewer, smile gently and put their index fingers to their lips in a gesture of hushing. They draw attention to what is going on in the other part of the house; in five cases to the servants who, having neglected their duties, are receiving suitors and in one case (most probably) to a domestic quarrel. Those were the subjects that entertained the owners of this kind of paintings – members of the upper class who found the depicted stories amusing. These representations have a broader context, and should

[12] William W. Robinson, "The 'Eavesdroppers' and Related Paintings by Nicolaes Maes," in *Holländische Genremalerei im 17. Jahrhundert. Symposium Berlin 1984*, Henning Bock and Thomas W. Gaehtgens, eds (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1987), p. 303. Jahrbuch Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 4; see also Victor I. Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 6 and 62–3.

[13] Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, Martin Kemp, ed., Penguin, London 1991, pp. 77–8. See Victor I. Stoichita, *L'instauration du tableau : métapeinture à l'aube des temps modernes*, Méridiens Klincksieck, Paris 1993, pp. 101–2.

[14] 1655, The National Gallery, London.

[15] See supposedly the most famous examples, portraits of Cornelis Anslo by Rembrandt – a print from 1640 and the painting from 1641 (Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin).

[16] Robinson, "The 'Eavesdroppers'...," op. cit., p. 291.

[17] Ibid.; see also *Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting*, Jane Iandola Watkins, ed., exh. cat., Philadelphia Museum of Art, 18 March – 13 May 1984; Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin (West), 8 June – 12 August 1984; Royal Academy of Arts, London, 7 September – 18 November 1984 (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1984), pp. 242–3, cat. no. 67, pl. 99.

[18] *A Woman Scolding, with a Maidservant Listening*, 1655, Guildhall Gallery, London; *Lovers, with a Woman Listening*, ca. 1655–1657, Apsley House, Wellington Museum, London; *The Eavesdropper*, 1657, Dordrechts Museum; *The Listening Housewife*, 1656, Wallace Collection, London; *The Listening Housewife*, 1655, The Royal Collection, London; *Lovers, with an Old Man Listening*, ca. 1655–1657, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

[19] Above all Wolfgang Kemp, "Kunstwerk und Betrachter. Der rezeptionsästhetische Ansatz," in Hans Belting et al., *Kunstgeschichte. Eine Einführung* (Berlin: Reimer, 1985), pp. 203–21; Martha Hollander, *An entrance for the eyes. Space and meaning in seventeenth-century Dutch art* (Berkeley–London: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 103–48; Ziemba, op. cit., p. 163 (note 386 – with further literature); Georgina Cole, "'Wavering Between Two Worlds.' The Doorway in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting" [online], *Philament* vol. 9 (2006) [access: 16 February 2011], pp. 18–37, available at World Wide Web: <http://www.arts.usyd.edu.au/publications/philament/issue9_pdfs/COLE_Doorways.pdf.>; Wayne Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 152–6.

be associated with motifs of a critique of lazy and immoral servants, as well as scolding wives disturbing the peace of the home that were ubiquitous in seventeenth-century literature.[20] It seems however that the role of the figures in the foreground is even more ambiguous and is not intended to merely indicate the negative character of the scenes presented in the background. This conclusion stems from the analysis of Maes's drawing *Studies of Listening Figures* from the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam (**fig. 5**).[21] The men and women are presented in profile, bent slightly forward. They do not point to anything with their hands but instead place their index fingers to their lips. At the same time their upper bodies are turned towards the viewer. The figure of a woman on the right side is particularly interesting – her right hand was sketched simultaneously in four different positions, which proves that the shift from using the pose of pointing to the gesture of request to remain silent was an unfolding process. Similar figures can be found in a few other drawings by Maes: *Interior with a Woman on a Stair* (**fig. 6**), *Interior with Listening Woman with a Child on Her Arm* (**fig. 7**) (verso of *Standing Youth in Long Robe*) and *Interior with Figure Descending a Stair* (**fig. 8**) – all from Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, *Four Sketches of Eavesdropping Figures* (verso of *Man Seated in His Study*), from The Maida and George Abrams Collection and *Eavesdropper at a Stairway* (verso of *Seated Woman Scraping a Parsnip* from The Frits Lugt Collection, Fondation Custodia in Paris, **fig. 9**).[22] In this context, the first of the above-mentioned sketches is especially interesting – an attitude of a depicted woman is almost identical (although in a mirror reflection) to that of the mistress in *The Idle Servant*. In both these works the figures are static and exude authority; their gestures are forceful and decisive. The eye contact and ironic smile (only hinted at in the drawing) are supposed to create the connection with the viewer and, as a consequence, a shared criticism of the laziness and promiscuity of servants (that plagued them in the popular perception). However, the surroundings are different. In the sketch the woman is standing on a staircase which is identical to the one depicted in the painting *The Listening Housewife* dated 1655 from the Royal Collection (**fig. 10**). The completeness of the drawing almost allows it to be considered as a draft for that composition; however, the motif of a pointing person on a staircase does not appear in this or any other painting from the group under discussion. The change of the concept of the gesture most probably took place sometime between the creation of *The Idle Servant* and the eavesdropper from the Royal Collection. That is when the aforementioned sketches were most likely created – first, *Interior with a Woman on a Stair*, constituting a near complete preparatory sketch for the painting and then the sheet showing the eavesdropping figures. We may assume that only after their completion did Maes paint the housewife on the stairs who, instead of ostentatiously pointing to any misbehaviour taking place in the interior

[20] Robinson, "The 'Eavesdroppers'...," op. cit., pp. 297–302; see also Simon Schama, "Wives and Wantons. Versions of Womanhood in 17th Century Dutch Art," *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1980), pp. 10–1; on the role of eavesdroppers in Dutch seventeenth-century literature and drama see Hollander, op. cit., pp. 110–2.

[21] See Jeroen Giltaij, *The Drawings by Rembrandt and his School in the Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam*, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam 1988, pp. 226–9, cat. no. 116; William W. Robinson, "Nicolaes Maes as a Draughtsman," *Master Drawings* 1989, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 146–62.

[22] See Giltaij, *The Drawings by Rembrandt and his School...*, op. cit., pp. 226–31, cat. no. 115, 117–118; William W. Robinson, *Bruegel to Rembrandt. Dutch and Flemish drawings from the Maida and George Abrams collection*, with an essay by Martin Royalton-Kisch, exh. cat., British Museum, London, 13 June – 22 September 2002; Institut Néerlandais, Paris, 10 October – 8 December 2002; Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 22 March – 6 July 2003 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 130–1, cat. no. 52, fig. 1; Peter Schatborn, *Rembrandt and his Circle. Drawings in the Frits Lugt Collection* (Bussum: Thoth Publishers; Paris: Fondation Custodia, 2010), vol. 1 (text), pp. 310–2, cat. no. 128 (verso); vol. 2 (plates), p. 146.

(as in the drawing), hushes the viewer. Only then was the series of paintings created, depicting figures with a gesture showing a request to remain silent and keep the secret, so that the eavesdropping could continue.[23] The smile visible on their faces is not only an ironic commentary on the immoral meetings, but also an offer, directed to a viewer of the paintings, of communal eavesdropping and voyeurism. The purpose of such change was not however just to introduce variety, nor to prove the pure compositional invention of the artist looking for a new variant of gesture and pose (which would, however, have been perceived in the same way).[24] The variations in the arrangement of the hand and arm of one of the figures in the Rotterdam drawing do not indicate a semantic closeness between "pointing" and "hushing," but, on the contrary, reinforce the differences between the two and the intentional departure from the use of one gesture in favour of the other. Thus, Maes deliberately shifted the focus from merely exposing moral misconduct of the depicted scene to consciously accepting the role of voyeur and eavesdropper by the viewer.

The change in perception of the eavesdroppers' gesture and their smile had further consequences. Let us look at *A Woman Scolding with a Maidservant Listening* from the Guildhall Collection in London. In the top right of the composition, we see the scene of a domestic quarrel. In the centre, a disloyal servant is eavesdropping on her employers, instead of discreetly making her retreat. The evidence of her laziness are the kitchen utensils lying around in disarray. The figures in the other paintings in the group have also abandoned their duties. In the *Lovers, with an Old Man Listening* from Boston's Museum of Fine Arts and *Lovers, with a Woman Listening* from Apsley House, the man and woman in the foreground have left the premises where they worked on sorting or reading documents. In the works from the Wallace Collection and Dordrechts Museum, the mistresses of the house prefer to eavesdrop rather than entertain their guests, visible in the rooms at the top of the stairs (although they should have been reprimanding the flirting maids and chasing away their suitors). The passive attitude of one of them has further consequences. The diners shown on the painting from the Dordrechts Museum will not get their supper because not only does the romantically distracted maid neglect to keep a cat out of the kitchen, but also because of the lack of intervention by the eavesdropper herself. The change in gesture and attitude of the figures in the foreground, therefore, completely altered the message of the work. The smile has no undertones of irony, but expresses amusement.[25] The mistresses of the house have no intention of intervening and stopping the couples from flirting; on the contrary, they wish to remain unnoticed. The servant girl from the painting in the Guildhall Collection has even taken off her shoes, probably fearing they would have tapped too loudly on the wooden stairs. Likewise, the woman in Cornelis Bisschop's painting, inspired by Maes's works, has left her clogs shoes at the top of the stairs.[26] What is even worse is that all of them draw the viewers into the damnable act of voyeurism! After all, their faces reveal no fear of being exposed. They smile gently and invitingly because they know that the viewers will not betray them – after all, they want to take a peep themselves.

23 For the chronological order of paintings depicting eavesdroppers, see Hollander, op. cit., pp. 103–8.

24 Robinson concludes: the sketches suggest that "[...] at one stage Maes contemplated an eavesdropper who pointed with an open hand [...] and he regarded this gesture as closely related to, perhaps interchangeable with, the forefinger on the lips." ("The 'Eavesdroppers'...," op. cit., p. 308). It should be noticed however that the gesture of the woman in the painting from the National Gallery was not repeated in the other paintings by Maes that are discussed.

25 Hollander, op. cit., p. 108.

26 *Eavesdropper*, ca. 1660, Norwich Castle Museum, Norfolk.

Eavesdropping of the depicted figures and voyeurism of the people standing in front of the painting are other subjects of Maes's works. They are at least of equal importance to the idleness and lack of morality of servants or anger of scolding wives. The change in the attitude of the key figures definitely added ambiguity to the compositions. The seventeenth-century viewer shared the amusement at the lower class and its "immoral" behaviour; and in one case he became the object of a joke himself.

There are many paintings, as Antoni Ziemba puts it, which are a symptom of the "voyeurism modus," so characteristic of Dutch art.[27] However, while the works by Maes and Bisschop can be characterized in this way, at the same time they are something more. One could say that they are examples of "realized voyeurism." While analyzing them, the viewer is conscious of the fact that he is not anonymous as his presence has been noticed by the painted figures. Thus, it is not enough to give an opinion of the scene depicted in the background of the composition – either in the maids' immoral behaviour or the scolding wife – or on the eavesdropping itself that is taking place in the foreground. The smiling figures, above all, force the viewer to define his own role in the relationship to the picture – to realize and reflect on the fact that he himself is a voyeur, that he, just as his painted eavesdropping consociate, does not want to be noticed.

In *The Curious Ones*, Bramer followed similar patterns for proposing his own dialogue with the viewer.[28] He made use of the curiosity of the viewer upon seeing a keyhole, the central and most intriguing element of the composition. Of course its enlarging was done on purpose for construction reasons – a keyhole had to enable a person to look inside the box. It plays an analogous role to the smiling figures in Maes's paintings – it makes the viewer realize that in order to discover the mysteries inside, he has to remain silent, and take a look unnoticed (**fig. 11**).

Although the figures depicted in the drawing do not have any direct eye contact with the viewer, the men pointing at the keyhole present two possible attitudes towards what is going on behind the closed door, or perhaps mainly towards the act of voyeurism itself. Which of the figures will the viewer follow? Will he restrain his curiosity or will he, like the others, take a peep? These dilemmas are illusionary because, indeed, the essence of perspective boxes is the peeping inside, as that is where the main representation is to be found. Suggesting such a dilemma is therefore an intentional device, because instead of restraining from peeping, it is, on the contrary, encouraging the viewer to do so. At the same time, it makes one realize that in a sense everyone who looks inside is a voyeur. An accomplished collector or art connoisseur would surely appreciate the perversity of Bramer's intention, exposing and making one aware of the "shameful" nature of voyeurism. A peep show with such an amusing image on the exterior would be a highlight in every *kunstkasten*.

There is much evidence that the drawing preserved in the Rijksprentenkabinet in Amsterdam contains alternative designs for the interior of the perspective box.[29] The recto shows *Interior with the Musicians* – a room closed off by a wall with three windows and steps leading to a door (**fig. 12**). On the left a man and woman are standing by a virginal; above them a chained ape is sitting on a ledge, and in front of them a dog is barking at a cat. In the middle of the composition, next to a table with musical instruments on it, a man in a hat is playing the violin. To the right, a parrot rests on the back of a chair. The cello standing against the wall and lute on the floor occupy the right part of the chamber. The whole picture is complemented with

[27] Ziemba, op. cit., p. 173.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ca. 1660, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

a curtain raised up to the ceiling. Light plays an important role in the structuring of space – brighter in the background and muted closer to the foreground. A sharp shaft of light coming from beyond the picture on the left cuts the space across. The figures by the virginal are depicted in soft semi-darkness. Walter Liedtke pointed out that the musical instruments on the right, especially those lying on the table, are reminiscent of those from *A View of Delft* by Carel Fabritius,[30] a painting that originally constituted the interior of a peep show.[31] He also noticed that the couple on the left reminds us of the figures from Vermeer's *The Music Lesson*, only shown from a different angle.[32] If we stood by the chair on which the parrot is perched, we would not only see the teacher and his student, but also (as in Vermeer's painting) the cloth-covered table. The cello lying on the floor between the table and the musicians seems to have been moved from the wall it leaned against in Bramer's composition. The works also share the amorous nature of the meeting around the virginal. Considering the dates of the creation of the paintings, Liedtke's supposition that we are dealing with an emulation of Bramer's work by the most famous painter from the Delft school is a tempting one.

In putting forward his theory about the purpose of the drawing, Liedtke noticed that, as in the interior of a London peep show by Van Hoogstraten, the furniture and other objects in Bramer's drawing are arranged around the walls in such a way that they can be painted on two or more surfaces. The musical instruments have been foreshortened and the architectural elements are drawn meticulously.[33] Are these arguments, however, convincing enough to attribute such a function to this drawing? Do we know how the authors of the perspective boxes prepared themselves for the difficult task of painting their interiors in such a way that the viewer looking through the peep hole could experience the perfect illusion?

David Bomford has noted that so far no drawings have been discovered that could be considered an element of the process of creating *perspectyfkas* and, most importantly, works showing the attempts to resolve specific perspective problems.[34] His research did reveal, however, that the drawings, and particularly the compositional outlines, might have been executed directly on the panels placed inside the boxes. Such was the case of *The Perspective Box with View of a Voorhuis*,[35] attributed to Pieter Janssens Elinga, where precisely marked perspective lines are visible beneath the paint layer. They served to correctly position the anamorphic elements of the composition in appropriate scale, so that distortions could be corrected when viewed from a single point – the hole in the box through which the viewer was looking. If such complicated preparatory drawings ever existed, they would have had to be accurate studies of perspective and revealed fragments of the composition in a distorted form. Bomford believes that the presence of the lines on the panels from the Bredius Museum and a certain discrepancy between them and the final composition, indicate that the process was, to some extent, spontaneous. The concept was executed directly on the panels by a trial-and-error method. This excludes, then, the possibility of any precise preparatory drawings or templates allowing the lines of perspective and outlines of the composition to be transferred onto the final surface. It does not, however,

30 1652, The National Gallery, London.

31 Liedtke, *A View of Delft...*, op. cit., p. 231.

32 Ca. 1662–1665, The Royal Collection, London.

33 Liedtke, *A View of Delft...*, op. cit., pp. 25 and 231.

34 Bomford, op. cit.

35 Bredius Museum, The Hague, ca. 1670–1680.

exclude the existence of any drawings that may have constituted the first conceptual outline of the composition. Such a sketch could have played a double role – as a starting point for the artist working on his piece and as a contract drawing, or '*vidimus*,' a visualization allowing the acquirer to approve the concept of the work. This seems to be the case with Bramer's drawing. Looking at it we can see what the viewer would see peeping through the hole of the *perspectyfkas*.

The interiors of the perspective boxes, as far as we know, always presented motifs of Dutch everyday life. It is worth to emphasize this fact, recalling the existing works or their fragments preserved to our times, as well as those we know about thanks to historical accounts. John Evelyn noted in his famous diaries that he saw a box in London with a view of "[...] the Great Church in Haarlem in Holland [...]."[36] Written in 1656, this is the first mention of a *perspectyfkas*. The earliest box known to us was created in 1652 by Fabritius. Only a fragment of it, namely a picture portraying a seller of musical instruments and the Nieuwe Kerk in Delft, survives to the present day.[37] It is also the only preserved work of this type showing a cityscape. An unknown work by the artist mentioned in the inventory of Catharina Tachoen's estate from 1669 could also have been one: "a perspective of the Court of Holland [Binnenhof] made by the late Fabritius."[38] Two of the aforementioned Copenhagen boxes show the interiors of Catholic and Protestant churches.[39] Other objects or their fragments show the interiors of patricians' houses. These are the pieces by Van Hoogstraten from the National Gallery in London (**fig. 13**) and one attributed to him from the Detroit Institute of Arts, Elinga from the Museum Bredius in The Hague and an anonymous work in the Nationalmuseet in Copenhagen.[40] We should also mention *Interior with the Jacket on a Chair* by Bisschop (formerly attributed to Hendrick van der Burch), recently recognized by Ziemba as a probable fragment of an nonextant *perspectyfkas*.[41]

Bramer's sketch showing the Dutch interior can therefore be included in the main thematic categories used in the boxes – we see musicians, an ordinary genre scene. But would the collector peeping through the hole not feel disappointed to see yet another picture showing a scene common in the paintings from that time? Or perhaps it holds a deeper meaning? That would not be so implausible, considering that the image from the London peep show is of a subtle erotic nature,[42] while the one from Detroit embodies vanitas, the transience of life.[43]

The nature of the couple's meeting depicted in the Amsterdam drawing is indicated by the animals in the room. Above the heads of the man and woman by the virginal, a chained ape is sitting on a small ledge – an animal symbolizing passionate love and an enslaved mind. The parrot perching on the back of the chair, instead of in a cage, should be understood as a sign of unconstrained love; just like the parrot sitting on the threshold of an open cage in the

36 John Evelyn, *Diary and Correspondence*, vol. 1 (New York–London: M. W. Dunne, 1901), p. 308.

37 *View of Delft*, The National Gallery, London, 1652. See Walter Liedtke in Liedtke, Plomp, Rüger, *Vermeer and the Delft School*, op. cit., p. 250–4, cat. no. 18 (with earlier literature).

38 Quoted after: Liedtke, "Delft Painting 'in Perspective'...," op. cit., p. 118. This is only a supposition because, as Liedtke indicates, the word "perspective" was also used to define pictures depicting architecture and townscapes.

39 Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen. Both dated ca. 1655–1660.

40 Koslow, op. cit., pp. 48–56.

41 Staatliche Museen, Gemäldegalerie, Berlin; see Ziemba, op. cit., pp. 175–6.

42 Koslow, op. cit., pp. 45–6; Ziemba, op. cit., p. 174.

43 For interpretations of the depictions see Koslow, op. cit., pp. 46–7 and 53–4.

Perspective: View Down the Corridor by Van Hoogstraten.[44] Their presence indicates that the man standing next to the virginal is charmed by the woman herself and not only by her music. The significance of the cat and dog in the foreground on the left is the same as in, for example, the *Barn Interior* by Cornelis Saftleven.[45] In both works the animals portrayed symbolize the contradictory aspects of human nature – namely vivid sensuality (the cat), as well as fidelity and loyalty (the dog).[46] Similarly, in Bramer's drawing, the cat can be interpreted as a symbol of seduction, sensuousness and lecherousness and makes a direct reference to the couple by the virginal. The dog barking at the cat would then be a warning against choosing the incorrect path when faced with a moral dilemma.

For an educated connoisseur and art collector, the box carries yet another message. The exotic creatures depicted in the drawing, namely the ape and parrot, amused all with the ability to mimic man's behaviour, gestures and voice. Since ancient times, the ape has symbolized what lies at the heart of every work of art – an imitation of nature. Pliny's *Ars simia naturae* took on even greater meaning in the context of peep shows as their main aim was "extreme naturalism, the most faithful and suggestive depiction of real space."[47] The perspective boxes were supposed to be a vehicle for achieving perfect imitation. Van Hoogstraten observed that their most surprising effect was that the depicted figures, only a finger tall, while peeping appeared to be life-size.[48] It seems therefore that Bramer, by depicting the animals inside, wanted to express the most important goal of art and the artist, namely aping or parroting nature. Animals in Van Hoogstraten's *Perspective of a Men Reading in a Courtyard* probably appear in the same context.[49] The work therefore, through the inclusion of representations of animals standing for the mimetic power of art, can be understood as a kind of lecture on the theory of art. Bramer was not the only artist to introduce the self-thematic work to his own perspective box. Without doubt the creator of *Interior of a Protestant Church*[50] wanted to achieve the same objective when he painted a fly on the edge of the book that can be seen in the foreground. Indeed, it is a reference to the ancient topos "Philostratus's bee" developed in modern historiography as "Giotto's fly," then repeated by Karel van Mander in *Het Schilder-boeck*.[51] Their use was to prove both the artist's ability to make painted objects "as if real" and his knowledge of the aforementioned topos. It was also supposed to be readable to the intellectually prepared viewer. Bramer's peep show was therefore a tool for attaining perfect imitation of reality, but it definitely was not limited to being only an illusionary depiction of a Dutch interior.

The box in which *Musicians* were supposed to have been painted would have been a sophisticated intellectual toy. There is one fact worth noticing – the person taking a peep would not

44 Ca. 1662, The Blathwayt Collection, Dyrham Park, Gloucester.

45 Ca. 1665, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover (New Hampshire).

46 *Masters of Seventeenth-Century Dutch Genre Painting*, op. cit., pp. 294–5, cat. no. 96, pl. 90.

47 Ziemba, op. cit., p. 176.

48 Koslow, op. cit., p. 38, also note 11.

49 The Blathwayt Collection, Dyrham Park, Gloucestershire.

50 Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen.

51 Jan Białostocki, *Myśliciele, kronikarze i artyści o sztuce. Od starożytności do 1500 roku* (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2001), p. 96; for a longer discussion of the subject see Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, "Giotto's Fly and the Observation of Nature," in *Deceptions and Illusions. Five Centuries of Trompe l'Œil Painting*, Sybille Ebert-Schifferer et al., eds, exh. cat., National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 13 October 2002 – 2 March 2003 (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2002), pp. 163–79; Ziemba, op. cit., p. 210, note 537 (with further literature).

have gone unnoticed. He would not have been detected either by any of the figures depicted, nor by the cat and dog on the floor symbolizing the relation between the couple by the virginal. It is the ape and the parrot, the animals symbolizing the deceptive properties of the boxes, who notice that someone is watching the assembled company. They are the only ones looking at the "intruder," thus revealing his presence. The surprised viewer would then realize that his "shameful behaviour" has not gone unnoticed. Anyone who has peeped inside Van Hoogstraten's box in London would have the same impression – the viewer examining the empty interior comes eye to eye with a dog staring at him (**fig. 14**). Similarly, in his other, this time monumental, works, the aforementioned *Perspective: Illusionary House Interior* and *Palace Courtyard and a Woman Reading a Letter* (Mauritshuis, The Hague) the author placed dogs in the foreground, eyeing the viewer alertly. Just like *The Curious Ones*, these works are in a certain way reminiscent of Maes's and Bisschop's paintings. In the latter, the viewer felt comfortable because his painted eavesdropping companion also wanted to remain undetected. The reaction of animals, however, is unpredictable. Therefore, the viewer feels "discomfort" because he is suddenly transformed from being the observer to the one being observed. Of course this feeling would only last a fraction of a second, giving way to his admiration for the artist who constructed the illusionary work in such a clever and witty way.[52] Bramer's drawing is the perfect example of a dialogue between the work and the viewer, a sophisticated game that the artist offers the voyeur peeping inside the *perspectyfkas*.

An analysis of Bramer's drawing raises further questions: is there a clear association between *Interior with the Musicians* and *The Curious Ones*? Is it possible that they both were designs for the same box? Both compositions perfectly complement one another.[53] It is also easy to imagine that the figures have gathered around the keyhole attracted by the music coming from behind the door. The nature of the meeting provokes amusement or outrage, as well as a rejection of voyeurism itself. The viewer looking inside could derive pleasure not only from the perfection of the illusion of the depicted interior, but also from the fact that the artist made him conscious of his role as a voyeur, just like those painted on the face of the box. What is more, his presence does not go unnoticed and can be betrayed by the watchful animals that have detected his presence. Once the viewer has realized that, he only has a second to move his eye away from the hole before the ape and parrot alert the others and disturb the harmony of the music.

There is a certain obstacle to that tempting interpretation, found on the verso of the very drawing. In the opinion of Walter Liedtke and Michiel C. Plomp, the *Musicians in the Loggia* constitutes an alternative composition to the recto (**fig. 15**).[54] This is argued by the theme of the concert – figures by the virginal (but this time a woman with a child on the right), and a musician in the centre of the composition, joined by another one playing the cello. The various objects are arranged within the space in the same way as in the composition on the other side. It is, however, the background of the drawing that gives it a different character. A column divides it almost perfectly in half. Instead of the wall and windows of the Dutch interior, we see buildings situated on the other side of the street. On the left are the arcades decorated with statues placed in semi-circular niches, ornaments and figural paintings on the vault. The building on the right

[52] Such reception of the work is close to the reception of *trompe-l'œil*; see Wolf Singer, "The Misperception of Reality," in *Deceptions and Illusions...*, op. cit., pp. 41–51.

[53] Also the dimensions of both drawings are similar: 39.1 × 56 cm; 37.2 × 46.3 cm.

[54] Liedtke, *A View of Delft...*, op. cit., p. 231; Liedtke, Plomp, Rüger, *Vermeer and the Delft School*, op. cit., p. 460.

with the façade regularly divided by the pilasters stretches into the depths of the composition, where a building, probably a Baroque church, can be seen. We look at a public space, though a completely different one from Fabritius's *View of Delft*; here, it is evidently Italian, or at least Italianate, architecture.

Even if we assume that the recto and verso of the Amsterdam drawing show the alternative versions of the same composition, it is still plausible that the *The Curious Ones* are the design for the external panel of the same peep show. Although looking at an Italianate background through the keyhole of a Dutch door may seem absurd, looking inside a chest of drawers is no less so. For who would expect to find inside a drawer the presbytery of a Gothic church or a palace hall? Yet it is also possible that the Düsseldorf drawing has nothing in common with the Amsterdam compositions. If so, the latter may have been an alternative design for the inside of a different perspective box.

Even more important is the fact that, by showing the musicians in the loggia, not only did Bramer propose an alternative solution of his composition – he proposed an alternative to all known perspective boxes depicting scenes of Dutch everyday life. This was a completely new type of work, an "Italian *perspectyfkas*!"

This unusual variant is however something more than another manifestation of Bramer's "Italianate" *modus*. This style, characteristic for most of his works, was mainly dictated by fashion and the client's taste. The perspective boxes on the other hand were the invention of domestic Dutch art, depicting familiar local surroundings. The creators of peep shows could not draw on the Italian model because none existed. For that reason, Bramer's idea was an artistic paradox or "a paradoxon," which Victor I. Stoichita describes as the goal of a "meta-painting."[55]

The perspective boxes were such rare items that access to them must have been limited. Evelyn describes the emotions they caused. He witnessed the huge interest that one of them provoked in London in 1656: "5th February 1656. Was shown me a pretty perspective and well represented in a triangular box, the great church in Haarlem in Holland, to be seen through a small hole at one of the corners, and contrived into a handsome cabinet. It was so rarely done, that all the artists and painters in town flocked to see and admire it."[56] This short account is very important because it shows that such objects were not peculiarities locked away in the collections of the chosen few; they were also made available to artists. As Delft was one of the centres where the boxes were created, the local masters must have had fairly easy access to them and therefore would have had a good idea of what was depicted inside.[57] Such knowledge was also accessible to Bramer, which may suggest that this break with convention was not a coincidence, but a conscious and intentional decision. The implementation of an artist's design for a perspective box, already a rare object in itself, would have been regarded as rare, unusual and exciting.

Bramer's perspective box (or boxes) was not only object amusing for the eye but perhaps, above all, the sophisticated *concetto*. It conveyed certain fundamental theoretical messages concerning the essence of this type of device, as well as the nature and aim of art. It is also perverse and ironic work because makes one fully realize that the viewer, whether he is aware of it or not, is always a voyeur.

The *œuvre* of Bramer, the illusionist, is as surprising as other aspects of his extensive work. Just like in the other cases, the artist followed his own original path, using perspective in a

55 Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image*, op. cit., passim.

56 Evelyn, op. cit., p. 308.

57 They would also have probably known works attributed to Van Vliet and constructed by Fabritius.

completely different way from the local artists. He was almost the only Delft painter given the opportunity to present his artistic approach in large-scale works. While the authors of *kerkinterieurs* and *interieursstukken* focussed almost exclusively on a documentary depiction of the reality that surrounded them, Bramer used his experience as an Italianate artist. He did so while decorating Nieuwe Doelen with the fresco technique or inspired by the great Italian Renaissance artists, whose works he had admired during his long stay in Italy. One might consider that he did what he had been taught, that he simply knew no other way and that Italianism was his own way of approaching art. However, the problem of creating perspective boxes, probably the most unusual aspect of his artistic output, contradicts such a proposition. Bramer found himself among only a handful of makers of such artistic peculiarities: Fabritius, Van Hoogstraten, Van Vliet, Elinga and Bisschop. With *The Curious Ones* and *Interior with the Musicians* he proved that he was capable of creating truly "Dutch works." But soon afterwards he created *Musicians in a Loggia*, a witty, *à rebours* design for an "Italian" box.

Although Bramer's works stood out from the phenomenon of the so-called Delft school, it is the fascination with illusion and perspective that connects him with it. This fascination yielded some unusual works. The seventeenth-century viewer, no matter if he looked at the illusionistic, large-scale works in Nieuwe Doelen and Prinsenhof, or peeped inside the perspective box, was confronted with works of art which, although on a completely different scale and in a different manner, were to create a deceptive imitation of the real world.

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