

The Art of Propaganda: Marketing Nationhood through Visual Imagery

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Purpose

During the seventeenth century, the Dutch Republic sought to project a positive global image centred around the principles of economic endeavour, moral stewardship and military resilience. By illustrating one way in which the country sought to communicate its international position, the paper provides an early example of political diplomacy and reputation management.

Design/methodology/approach

Pictorial narratives provide an important but often underutilised insight into our cultural, social and economic history. As works of art were considered legitimate and authoritative forms of communication, their importance can lie beyond any aesthetic accomplishment. Using established iconographic techniques, this paper deconstructs and interprets the meaning contained within a specific genre painting, *The Young Mother* (1658) by Gerrit Dou.

Findings

Rather than being devoid of meaning, *The Young Mother* represents a narrative purposely constructed to symbolise the cultural, religious and economic character of the United Provinces. It celebrates success through global trade, innovation and enterprise while simultaneously reminding audiences of the country's moral and spiritual foundations. Like the patriotic allegory of *De Hollandse Maag* protecting the sacred space of the *hortus conclusus*, the painting is a secular representation of the new Loca Sancta.

Originality

While acknowledging that *The Young Mother* has been praised for its visual qualities, this paper maintains that any broader political significance has been largely overlooked. The analysis and findings therefore offer original interpretations from which new conclusions are drawn.

Keywords

Golden Age

Genre Art

The Gift

Gerrit Dou

Charles II

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Introduction

In November 1660 Charles II of England was presented with a yacht, furniture, 28 paintings and a series of antique sculptures from the States of Holland and West Friesland (Mahon, 1949a; 1949b; 1950). This became known as the '*Dutch Gift*' and was presented as a show of support for the King's restoration and the recognition of the close connection between the Dutch and English royal courts. Upon their presentation, it was reported that Charles thanked the Dutch:

‘for so worthy a present, and express’d his willingness to enter into a neerer [sic] Alliance with them’.¹

The majority of works making up the offering were bought from the collection of two Dutch merchants and from the artist Gerrit Dou. While the contents of *the Gift* and the rationale for their inclusion has been previously detailed (Broekman and Helmers, 2007; Griffey 2011), one work, *The Young Mother* painted by Dou himself, has remained largely overlooked. This is despite the composition drawing particular praise from the King and Dou being offered the post of Court painter (which was subsequently declined).

As one of only two Dutch artists included in the States offering, Dou's contribution would have been considered particularly significant. Some have suggested that the composition's ultra-realistic imagery enabled the Republic to showcase the quality of Dutch art to Charles II. Undoubtedly, the strong chiaroscuro, the rendered textures² and delicate style contributed to Dou's reputation as one of the foremost artists of the day. While it has generally been accepted that *The Young Mother* represents an extraordinarily fine work of art and highlights the skill of the painter, it is also recognised that the image is far from being an accurate representation of seventeenth century Dutch domestic life. While acknowledging its aesthetic

qualities, this paper argues that Dou's composition has a deeper inherent meaning and is a purposively contrived, symbolic narrative that sought to extol the values and virtues of the United Province.

Although in recent years there has been an upsurge of interest in the creation of national identity and the branding of place, there remains much debate about its meaning and scope (Dinnie 2008; Szondi, 2008). Some for example, view nation branding as having parallels with the concepts of product and corporate branding. This interpretation conceives national identity as a strategic tool designed to achieve a competitive advantage through the attraction of investments, tourists, human capital and trade (Gudjonsson, 2005; Kaneva 2011). Others have suggested that while national branding cannot be divorced from the pursuit of economic goals, its foundations, in part at least, lie in the earlier concept of public diplomacy.

Traditionally, this involves the direct communication between governments and foreign audiences and, through acts of encouragement and persuasion, the aim is to influence opinions and behaviours. While often arising in response to tensions between states, public diplomacy recognises that the reputation of a nation needs to be managed in both economic and political terms (Szondi 2009). This paper suggests that *the Gift* was an act of 17th century public diplomacy designed to enhance the international reputation of the Dutch State, improve Anglo-Dutch trade links as well as establish better relations with the English crown.

The instruments of political persuasion remain multifarious. In addition to visual and textual narratives, they may include events, promotions, gifts and donations (Dinnie and Lio, 2010; d'Hooze, 2007). Even in the seventeenth century, the advantages of creating reputational capital was recognised. A positive global image could lead to enhancements in trade,

increased foreign investment and improved political relationships (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2002; Ollins, 2002; Anholt, 2004).

By presenting Charles II with *the Gift*, the United Provinces sought to develop its international legitimacy and reinforce its national identity. Including the work of Gerrit Dou as part of this offering, alluded to the material culture and moral values inherent within this identity. As works of art were considered authoritative forms of communication, the importance of *The Young Mother* lay beyond any visual accomplishment. While not every painting from the Dutch Golden Age implied meaning or offered didactic commentary (Hecht, 1992), this paper suggests that the composition is a representation of economic and social stability, religious order and cultural toleration.³ Not only is *The Young Mother* a portrayal of family life, it is also a symbol of Dutch national identity. Whether Charles II was conversant in the visual imagery of seventeenth century genre art, remains uncertain, (although studies of early propaganda suggest this may not have been of primary concern).⁴ Certainly, those responsible for commissioning and selecting the work would have been aware of its inherent meaning and its potential to stimulate debate. Its inclusion as part of *the Gift* was not only intended to recognise the legitimacy of the English crown, it was designed to both idealise and distinguish the values of the United Provinces.

To demonstrate the paintings symbolic narrative, the paper is divided as follows, first, to reduce the chances of pictorial homonymy (Bedaux, 1987 p.154), Dou's work is placed both within its historical and artistic context. As pictures remain multivalent objects and receptive to the meaning placed upon them, works of art can be ascribed a significance not intended by the artist. Second, as misinterpretation can be reduced through contextualisation, a brief overview of the relationship between Charles II and the United Provinces is provided (de Jongh, 1996, p.123). Similarly, the misreading of visual imagery is most likely to occur when individual signs and motifs are considered in isolation or ascribed a meaning out with their

interpretive rubric (Gombrich, 1985, p.14; Becker, 1996, p.140). As this paper suggests that Dou's composition contains iconographic symbolism, the third section briefly details the historical conventions of genre art and its role as a medium of communication. To provide the case that Dou's portrait of *The Young Mother* is more than an expertly crafted aesthetic representation, the painting is visually deconstructed and its meaning interpreted and discussed. Finally, a series of conclusions are drawn.

The Historical Context: Charles Stuart and the Dutch Gift

With the accession of Charles II to the English throne in 1660, the United Provinces hoped for better relations with England. The King had recently spent two months in the Netherlands and his sister Mary was the Princess Consort of the House of Orange. This it was hoped would provide opportunities to rebuild relationships with England that had become strained since the interregnum. Although being the only other European Protestant republic,⁵ the Dutch were no supporters of the English Commonwealth (Hsia, 2002, p.5; Frijhoff, 2002, p.31). Attempts by the Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell to create an agreement with the Republic, had been rebuffed on the basis that it could impact upon trade (especially with Spain) and relegate the States to a subservient position in any subsequent alliance (Rommelse, 2010, p.596).

In an age that promoted the merits of enterprise and propounded the philosophy of *carrière ouverte au caractère*,⁶ there was also an awareness that the English political establishment had become increasingly willing to support an economic policy agenda (North, 1999, p.52). Developing commercial, maritime and industrial interests not only improved Parliament's financial position it strengthened its political foundations through the creation of the nation state (Rommelse, 2010, p.608). The English government were also receptive to formulating an aggressive maritime strategy designed to enhance the country's own international position.

Protectionist policies such as the Act of Navigation (1651) were designed primarily to damage Dutch maritime trade and had contributed directly to the first Anglo-Dutch War (1652-1654) (Rommelse, 2010, p.597).⁷ The restoration of the Stuart King represented a new regime and was seen as a way of improving both diplomatic and economic relations.

At the same time, some within the Dutch Republic were concerned that Charles' accession could create a new political order and be used as a means of restoring the fortunes of the House of Orange. Unlike other Western European countries, political authority within the United Provinces was not defined by either Church or Crown and there remained relatively few aristocratic families. Rather, the ruling elite were primarily drawn from a number of established families (North, 1999, p.43-49).⁸ While many provinces were willing to accommodate an Orangist resurgence in order to achieve improved political and commercial outcomes, the deference shown by some provincial assemblies and town councils led to mounting unease. A small but influential number of Amsterdam's *vroedschap*⁹ including Johan de Witt and Cornelius de Graeff were worried that a revival of the House of Orange could threaten the States party regime (Israel, 1998, p.749). This concern was not eased with Princess Mary's circular to each provincial assembly requesting that her son, Prince William, be assigned to high office.

Having opposed William II's plans to come to the aid of the Stuart cause in 1650, expelled Charles from the Republic in 1653 and excluded the House of Orange from the Stadtholderate of Holland through the 1654 Act of Seclusion, Amsterdam's *vroedschap* now looked to appease the new King. Motivated by the need to minimise popular unrest from Orangist supporters and possibly aware of the monarch's willingness to cultivate multiple political allegiances,¹⁰ in 1660-61 they embarked upon their 'English' strategy. Having boycotted the House of Orange since 1650, Princess Mary and her son were now invited to

visit Amsterdam while Charles was encouraged to travel via Holland on his return to England (Israel, 1998, p.749).

To further reinforce Anglo-Dutch relationships and lay the foundations for a new beginning,¹¹ it was decided to present an almost unprecedented collection of valuable objects to the newly crowned monarch. The *vroedschap* nominated a committee headed by the republican Cornelius de Graeff to oversee *the Gift* and draw up a treaty of friendship. The latter proposed an ‘unbreakable and everlasting alliance’ that improved maritime trading relationships and forged a coalition against third party aggression. *The Gift* itself comprised 12 Graeco-Roman sculptures plus 24 Italian paintings from the collection of Gerard and Jan Reynst and included works from Titian, Tintoretto, Bassano and Schiavone. The States paid 80,000 guilders for this part of the collection before adding a bedstead, accompanying furniture plus four more paintings by Elsheimer, Saenredam and Gerrit Dou (who supplied two, including *The Young Mother*).¹² The city of Amsterdam also provided Charles with a yacht, the *Mary* while the entire assembly was accompanied by a specially commissioned poem by the Dutch poet, Joost van den Vondel (Broekman and Helmers, 2007, p.239).¹³

Many of the individual items included as part of *the Gift* have been shown to have specific symbolic or cultural value. For example, den Vondel had previously published prefatory poems in the Dutch translation of *Defensio Regina*, a publication specifically designed to gain continental support for the return of the House of Stuart. Offering Charles II, a yacht and paintings primarily drawn from the Reynst collection in Amsterdam can be seen as the city’s attempt to atone for its treatment of the House of Orange. Prince William had been born in the bed purchased from Charles’ sister Mary Stuart. Its presence sought to remind the King about the historical ties between both countries. Similarly, Pieter Saenredam’s painting of a protestant church interior may have been intended to promote the common spiritual link that united the two nations.

The inclusion of Italian paintings, sculptures and the work by Elsheimer¹⁴ appears to a conscious deviation from the earlier tradition of presenting works by Dutch artists. In both 1610 and 1636 the Republic had presented England with gifts that symbolised Dutch national identity. In 1660 it was agreed by the States General that they should break from this practice. Prior to the gift being assembled, the Dutch had sent an envoy to England to assess the artistic and cultural tastes of the King. It was noted that while works by artists such as Titian, Mantegna and Raphael had been lost from the Royal collection belonging to Charles I, the new monarch still had a strong predilection toward Italian art. By presenting a gift that comprised renowned Renaissance masters, the Republic was publicly acknowledging what Charles had lost. At the same time, it was hoped that the purchase of 24 relatively rare paintings from the Reynst collection also demonstrated a sophistication of taste on the part of the United Provinces as well as evidence of their international trade links. (Broekman and Helmers, 2007; Helmers, 2011).

As de Graeff and the committee appointed by the *vroedschap* acquired items with explicit communicative value, it is perhaps incongruous that they should overlook an opportunity to include *The Young Mother* and visually represent the country's own material culture and moral values to the newly crowned Monarch.

From the perspective of both sides, *the Gift* remained diplomatically significant. For the Dutch, it symbolised both political atonement as well as economic opportunity. The presentation of goods was often considered a precursor to establishing more formal trading relationships (Swan, 2021, p.14). For the English King, *the Gift* represented a means of generating a royal identity and enforcing a vision of monarchy. During the reign of his father, Charles I, the court was a potent symbol that not only resonated with rituals and ceremonies

but also remained a prominent arena for economic endeavour, political discourse and artistic developments. After his accession to the throne, Charles II moved quickly to establish a court that resembled his fathers. The recognition bestowed upon him by the Republic helped to affirm that England had once again returned to a hereditary monarchy (Jenkinson 2010, pp. 8-13; Sharpe 2013, pp.168 -170. Perhaps understandably therefore, at a presentation at the Banqueting House in London in November 1660, *the Gift* was favourably received by the King.

The Artistic Context: cultural commodification and the ‘genre’ tradition

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the visual arts saw a movement away from the “contemplative abstract form” towards more human and natural representations. Prior to the 1550’s scenes of everyday life had been mainly confined (in Europe at least) to frescos, etchings or manuscript footnotes (Sterling, 1959, p.11).¹⁵ However, Northern Renaissance artists such Pieter Bruegel (c1529 - 1565) and Joachim Beuckelaer (1534 – 1574) began producing images that on the surface at least, sought to depict everyday life with a degree of "ruthless realism" (Falkenburg, 1996, p.13). In Italy, England and the Netherlands in particular, demand grew for more secular artistic works with peasant scenes, seascapes, urban panoramas and images of the natural world proving particularly popular.¹⁶ The style, composition and subject matter of these ‘genre’ scenes represented a departure from the classical imagery and higher order themes characteristic of the earlier, medieval period (Franits 2004).¹⁷ Genre paintings were a particularly popular medium and it has been estimated that between 1568-1648, over five million works of art were created in the Netherlands alone (Montias, 1989).¹⁸

While the majority of these images were created purely for their aesthetic qualities, pictorial narratives were also seen as an authoritative channel of communication. The legitimacy of visual expression meant that genre works had the power to reinforce attitudes, influence behaviour and persuade public opinion (Welch, 2005, p.23). The authenticity of visual expression offered artists and patrons a means of commenting upon contemporary society and culture. Paintings could provide anything from satirical political characterisations to ideal representations of nationhood. While levels of illiteracy in Europe could limit the influence of textual narratives, works of art could convey meaning to anyone familiar with the interpretive conventions of the time (McTighe 2004, p.321).

Unlike earlier, historical compositions that focused upon specific events, genre scenes could remain simultaneously realistic and ambiguous while maintaining a strong sense of narrative. The blurring of the actual and the fictitious, meant works of art could offer an "illusive reality" that bore little resemblance to specific events. Rather than symbolise transparent expressions of cultural value, images could be constructed and reconstructed in response to circumstance. The blending of the real and the illusionary through an authoritative communicative medium, made it difficult for audiences to discern what was true or historically accurate. Far from being designed to strengthen links to reality, genre imagery had the potential to authenticate a subjective legitimacy by declaring what was both 'true' and 'genuine'. Rather than draw upon actual experiences, paintings could establish normative principles around politically conditioned agendas.

Perhaps one of the most obvious challenges in this paper is understanding why *The Young Mother* has not previously been identified as a symbol of Dutch national identity. Given the popularity of iconological interpretation,¹⁹ why has the significance of this narrative been largely overlooked? Contextually, *the Gift to Charles* has been either portrayed as an act of friendship or as a desperate measure by a corrupt regent culture fearful of an Orangist revival

(Broekman and Helmers, 2007, p.238-242). The historical circumstances that surround the collection may therefore have mitigated against any search for a deeper narrative. Others have simply argued that Dou's work remains largely devoid of meaning.²⁰ Some classical as well as more contemporary commentators have maintained that the artist's work should be admired primarily for its aesthetic qualities. Indeed, the extreme precision with which his compositions were executed led to the poet Dirck Tradenius to compare him to Zeuxis and Parrhasius.²¹ While some such as Philip Angel, (a contemporary of Dou) recognised his talent and the ability to generate significant income from painting, Angel makes no mention of any of Dou's work containing inherent didactic or polemical qualities. Indeed, he suggests the role of the artist is to resemble life by observing and faithfully reproducing the natural world (Sluijter, 1996, pp.181-182). Some observers have been more openly critical, the French journal and art critic Théophile Thoré for example argued that Dou's work lacked both mystery and spontaneity (Wheelock, 2000, pp.15-16) while the history painter Houbraken suggested that the artist squandered his talents on meaningless subjects (Hecht 1992, pp.87-88).

To reinforce this view, the rather unexceptional description that accompanied the painting is often noted. When presented to Charles II as part of *the Gift*, it was described simply as:

"Dow. A Dutch woman at worke her childe in ye cradle, her maid by with fowle & severall other things," (Quoted in Hecht, 1992, p.87)

This paper will argue that Dou did not seek simply to objectify reality, instead he offered audiences a more elusive, political narrative. Rather than depict moments in time, his works were deliberate artistic constructions infused with iconographic symbolism (Emmens, 1969; de Jongh, 1996). While not suggesting that all genre paintings sought to communicate ethical values or rules of conduct (De Vries 1996, p.214), through an interpretation of its subject

matter, motifs and objects, this paper seeks to illustrate how *The Young Mother* sought to be a representation of Dutch national identity.

Methodology

To understand whether a painting seeks to communicate implied meaning first requires an understanding of the historical, political and socio-cultural influences of the time. While *The Young Mother* was painted during the middle part of the seventeenth century, this does not simply establish it as a genre painting. While acknowledging the importance of identifying the frameworks within which art is produced, Gombrich (1985) notes how some artists ignore or defy convention and create works that reflected their own predilections and preferences.

The Young Mother was therefore first analysed through the use of established artistic principles. This included an examination of the paintings format, including its shape, size and orientation. As will be illustrated, the later modifications made by Dou helps in our understanding of the compositions hidden narrative. Next, the visual elements of the painting were explored, for example whether colour had been used to create contrasts, establish focal points and convey specific themes. Similarly, the use of dominating lines were examined to determine whether they had been used to guide the viewers eyes toward specific spaces. At the same time the interaction between each of the visual elements (line, shape form space etc) was also considered.

Drawing upon Panofsky's (1970) approach to conventional analysis. the paintings subject matter was next considered. The positioning of subjects, their body language and attire and the objects that surrounded them, were each examined in turn. While this form of analysis assists in establishing dates and assisting authenticity, such an approach is essentially procedural and offers only limited interpretation (Panofsky, 1970). Indeed, Gombrich (1985) specifically warns of the danger of assigning meaning based upon the simple recognition of

signs and symbols. Only by applying the principles of iconology to the conventions of the genre tradition could the paper explore whether deeper, intrinsic meaning existed within Dou's composition. Using established iconographic interpretative techniques, the paper drew meaning through the explicit application of codes, signs and literary keys. The symbolism of each item is detailed in the text and its contribution to the wider narrative is discussed.

At the same time, it is acknowledged that the implicit nature of iconology means that meaning is not something derived from agreement. While accurately identifying the intended message of a composition remains a central tenet of iconological discourse, attempting to understand why an individual chooses to create a particular work is often indeterminable. As a consequence, it may remain impossible for any single work to be fully and unequivocally deconstructed (Gombrich, 1985). Such limitations are acknowledged in the final section of the paper.

The Young Mother (1658)

Born in Leiden in 1613, Gerrit Dou originally trained as a glass painter. In 1627 he joined the workshop of Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn where he remained until his Master departed for Leiden in 1631. While Dou's early work closely followed Rembrandt's biblical figural types, he soon developed a reputation for highly detailed, small format works. In addition to being one of the co-founders of the Guild of St Luke he held the post of 'vaendrager', or (standard-bearer, in the militia) and founded the School of Fijnschilders (fine painters). Among his pupils were Gabriel Metsu, Abraham de Pape, Frans van Mieris the Elder and Godfried Schalcken.



Figure 1 The Young Mother (1658)

The Young Mother is a painting in oil on an oak panel. Reflective of Dou's style of work, the composition is exact,²² highly technical as well as being comparatively small (73.5 cms * 55.5 cms). It is signed by the artist and dated 1658. Originally intended as a wedding gift, the painting is thought to have been withdrawn from commission and remained in Dou's studio until viewed by the States delegation.²³ After its presentation to the Charles II, it remained in London until the Dutch Stadhouder William III became King of England in 1688 and brought the painting back to his palace in Het Loo. Since 1821 it has belonged to the Royal Cabinet of Paintings, Mauritshuis Collection in Den Haag.

Images of the household and domestic life remained popular genre themes. However, on first viewing audiences may have remained uncertain whether they were viewing a kitchen or a living space. Unlike more realistic images of Dutch households (see for example Nicolaes Maes' *The Naughty Drummer Boy* (c1655) or Vermeer's *Lady Writing a Letter with her Maid*, (1670)) there appears to be a deliberate ambiguity over the space itself (Becker 1996, p.157).²⁴ The formality of the room is reinforced by expensive furniture, a window bearing a coat of arms and full length curtains. At the same time, the room comprises an image of a partially gutted fish, game hanging from a hook as well as an eclectic assortment of vegetables. In a basket besides the window lies a skinned animal next to an upturned pewter flask. The slightly abstruse nature of the room is further reinforced by its expansive interior which is emphasised by a drape that hangs over a balustrade above a candle chandelier. As the viewers eyes are drawn beyond the stained glass window towards the ceiling, the room takes on a spiritual dimension. The vertical lines of the central column and the wooden arcades extend upward into the darkness and evoke almost church like imagery. Rather than seeking to depict a scene of domestic activity and offer a realistic portrayal of Dutch daily life, Dou is offering his audience a work rich in secular and religious symbolism.

Dou's apostolic associations remain a deliberate attempt to reflect the competing moral and material values that characterised Dutch society. While acknowledging the need to balance religious ideals against economic imperatives, the Reformed Church had previously expressed concern over the impact of conspicuous consumption upon the moral fabric of society. As it was feared that a shift toward more secular values could undermine the country's spiritual foundations, the imperative was to ensure salvation in any advancement toward a more material culture. Nowhere could these competing ideals be better represented than in images of the home. Paintings of house interiors that could simultaneously portray prosperity, modesty and restraint were therefore greatly admired. Through symbols of religious piety, domestic order and moral conduct, the home could be established as a new Protestant hierotopy (Simsky, 2010). In *The Young Mother*, Dou alludes to the virtue of asceticism, the depiction of fine, but not ostentatious furniture suggests the pursuit of comfort rather than refinement. While the curtains and wall panelling are indicative of a wealthy household, the functional table and chest on either side of the room, are suggestive of a life tempered by moderation.

The sacralisation of the material world meant the family unit could be placed at the heart of the new *Loca Sancta*. The central character in the composition is depicted sitting on a chair next to an open window. She has a near angelic quality and is meticulously detailed with almost translucent skin and individual strands of hair showing from underneath her cap. Having been distracted from her sewing, she confidently engages the viewer by directly returning their gaze.²⁵ While the Reformed Church often treated genre scenes with distrust, images of mothers undertaking their domestic duties were seen as being at the heart of Dutch success. Spinning, sewing and lacemaking were regarded as essential skills for the household and an important female role (Westerman, 2007, p.125). By diligently undertaking her work, she is seen to be setting a virtuous example. At the feet of the mother in a wicker cradle is her

child who is being cared for by one of her domestic helpers. The attention bestowed upon the infant by the servant girl symbolises the importance of a moral and spiritual upbringing. In the background two additional characters can be seen tending the fire and a cooking pot. Their endeavours are evidence of an established and industrious household.

Around the room Dou has methodically placed numerous items and objects to symbolise the virtues of domesticity. A broom and bucket reinforce the sanctity of the home through cleanliness, while the foot warmer signifies comfort and security. Unlike genre scenes of taverns and brothels where shoes are left on, (see for example Jan Steen's *Merrymaking in a Tavern with a Couple Dancing* c.1670), the carefully situated slipper on the floor is emblematic of urban homeliness and indicative of its sacred nature. On the vertical column almost in the centre of the painting hangs a birdcage, below which is an image of Cupid. Birdcages were frequently depicted in Dutch art to symbolise desire²⁶ while Cupid represented faithfulness and the love of one over the love of many (Wieseman, 2014, p.84). By including both images in the composition, Dou suggests a marriage full of pure harmony.²⁷

The portrait of *The Young Mother* however not only promotes the ideals of moral stewardship. The economic success of the Netherlands had been initially founded upon fishing, whaling, textiles and agriculture. This was later accompanied by a growing reputation in the areas of banking, shipping and international trade. Ports such as Amsterdam, Delft and Zeeland became recognised centres for the sale of spices, silks and precious metals, while companies such as *West-Indische Compagnie* (WIC) and the *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC) controlled global supply routes (Israel, 1998, pp. 330-337; Price, 2011, p.20). Such achievements are acknowledged in Dou's composition. Sighted immediately behind the mother are a globe and compass, a seashell, books and a map.

In addition to being recognised as symbols of scholarship and scientific enquiry, globes sought to remind audiences of the country's international position and worldly influence (Smith, 1982 p.272; Hollander, 2002, p.182).²⁸ Similarly, a compass alludes to the nation's maritime achievements. Given the United Provinces close association with the sea, numerous genre paintings celebrated the contribution of its merchant and military fleets to the country's economic development and strategic defence. Painters such as Hendrik Vroom (c.1562 – 1640) and Willem van de Velde II (1633-1707) had achieved fame by commemorating both naval victories as well as commercial seafaring activities. Maps were frequently used to decorate Dutch homes and were hung on walls like paintings and tapestries.²⁹ As a consequence, they appear in numerous genre representations of Dutch households.³⁰ Apart from their aesthetic and instructional value, maps could offer a visual legitimacy that served to reinforce feelings of patriotism and nationhood.³¹ Audiences could be reminded that the country's global expansion and the economic benefits gained from overseas trade were, in part, brought about by improvements in navigation and advances in cartography (Hollander, 2002, p.182; Wieseman, 2014, p.70). Shells were often brought back by trading merchants and frequently included in still life compositions and genre scenes (Cheney, 1987, p.135; Westermann, 2007, p.125).³² Their exotic nature offered a visual tribute to the country's extensive overseas activities with different shells often being used to represent different continents. Like the other objects on the shelf above the mother, its inclusion serves to reinforce the country's international reputation while simultaneously acknowledging the material foundation upon which the nation was established.

Traditionally, the hunting of animals such as deer, stags and wild boar had been the limited to members of the aristocracy. Similarly, the shooting of pheasant, grouse and partridge was restricted to particular social classes. The prominent display of game carcasses in the home of the young mother therefore symbolises an evolving social order. By playing a progressively

more significant role in civil society the *Mercator* class had come to directly challenge the traditional divisions that defined rank and societal position (Israel, 1998, pp.344-348).

Although not of noble birth, hard work and commercial endeavour had allowed some individuals to accumulate significant wealth, purchase estates and enjoy an almost aristocratic lifestyle (Slive, 1998, p.289). As enterprise was central to the success of the Republic, the inclusion of game items recognises the rise of a new urban bourgeoisie.

The depiction of a large fish on a plate in the lower right hand side of the painting is not only indicative of the family's wealth, but also a further visual reminder of the country's close association with the sea and the economic benefits fishing had brought to the nation. Cod and herring were recognised as mainstays of the Dutch economy and their commercial importance had led some artists to specialise in still life painting of the subject (see for example Abraham van Beyeren (1620-1690) or Joseph de Bray (1630-1664)). Like his contemporaries, Dou seeks to celebrate an industry that helped shape the history and culture of the Republic.

By placing a large cabbage on top of a wooden bowl and a bunch of orange carrots prominently in the foreground, Dou's composition not only alludes to the wealth of the family, he acknowledges the Republic's reputation as an internationally recognised centre for horticultural and agricultural production (see Stone-Ferrier p.44).³³ Global trade and innovations in food preservation in the early part of the seventeenth century had led to a movement away from a grain based diet. As landowners sought to meet growing demand, a network of markets, intensive agricultural practices and transportation systems transformed the rural economy. Cities such as Leiden and Delft initially developed reputations for the cultivation of coarse vegetables (cabbages, carrots, turnips, parsnips and onions) and in the second half of 17th century, lettuce, spinach and cauliflower (fine vegetables) (Stone-Ferrier, 1996, pp.39-41).

The writer Samuel Hartlib noted the substantial importation of vegetables into England from Europe. Hartlib in his 1665 treatise *The Legacy of Husbandry* commented on ‘ignorant’ agricultural practices in many parts of England and the need to import goods from Italy, Spain, France and the Low Countries. He noted that:

“...Cabages, Colleflovers and to sow Turneps, Carrets and Parsnips were at that time great rarities we having few or none in England, but what came from Holland and Flanders,..”(p.9),

Compositions that celebrated abundance and plenty therefore became common compositional themes. For example, Gabriel Metsu (1629-1667), one of the most important genre artists in Amsterdam during the mid-seventeenth century, was credited with painting at least fifteen separate market scenes. While Joachim Wtewael’s *Woman Selling Vegetables*, (c.1618) shows a table overflowing with a vast array of different produce. In contrast, Dou’s inclusion of vegetables in his portrait of *The Young Mother* is more contained and does not seek to employ artistic license.³⁴ The bright orange carrots (Hoornse wortel) were a source of civic pride and their inclusion is an acknowledgement of the nation’s expertise in horticultural innovation.

Cabbages were popular objects in seventeenth century genre paintings and their inclusion was often an opportunity for artists to demonstrate their technical skills and powers of observation. In addition however, the cabbage also symbolised life in general and female fertility in particular (Brandenburg, 1996 p.62). Its inclusion in *The Young Mother* therefore was not only a celebration of Dou’s artistic talents, but a further reflection of Dutch cultural values, being simultaneously ostentatious and ordinary.³⁵

As the eye is drawn into the shadows of the composition, the viewer notices a cloak and sword hanging from a hook. These objects combined with the husband’s omission from the

painting are often thought to reflect the gendered division that characterised seventeenth century Dutch society. Although the role of women was acknowledged as important for the success of the nation, genre images often suggested their place remained in the home rather than in the world outside (Baer, 2000b, p.107).

While genre art afforded numerous opportunities to reinforce societal roles and espouse the virtues of domestic order, it is suggested that in *The Young Mother*, Dou is drawing upon an older political allegory. While Charles' accession offered the opportunity for the United Provinces to renew its friendship with England, the States would have been mindful that it had only been six years since both nations were at war. Imagery that alluded to the need for constant vigilance and a readiness to defend against an unseen enemy, would seem consistent with the theme of the painting.

Originating as a religious medieval emblem that alluded to the purity of the Virgin Mary, by the end of the sixteenth century *De Hollandse Tuin* (The Garden of Holland) had become a popular motif that symbolised the liberation of the Netherlands from Spanish rule.

Traditionally comprising a wall or fence surrounding an enclosed space, it was protected by a lion that stood guard over the entrance.³⁶ In alternate versions, the garden was protected by a woman who is often depicted holding a spear, sword or displaying a hat that symbolised liberty. Like the Lion, *De Hollandse Maagd* (The Dutch Maiden) was an emblem that represented strength, vigilance and the independence of the fatherland (Chapman, 186, p.244; Peacock, 2019, pp.68-127; Kobayashi-Sato 2016). In Willelm Buytewech's 1615 etching *Allegory of the deceitfulness of Spain and the freedom and prosperity of the Seven Provinces*, both lion and maiden are depicted guarding over the country and the privileges for which the nation had fought.

In a way similar to the Maiden being seen as the personification of Dutch identity, *The Young Mother* is a symbolic representation of a country's national ideals. While the *De Hollandse Maag* protects the sacred space of the *hortus conclusus*, the young mother guards over the sanctity of her household, for it is for too remains a *Loca Sancta*. Like the freedoms celebrated in Buytewech's etching, the symbols of achievement, innovation and endeavour, are societal values for which the country must be defended. Both the household and the nation itself draws strength from the virtues of order, piety and moral conduct. The determination to protect all that is precious, is captured in the mother's self-assured gaze. Her confident look, directly toward the viewer is similar to the *Maiden* in Jan Tengenagel's (c1601-1625) patriotic *Allegory of the prosperity of the Republic under Prince Maurits of Delft*. By creating a composition that ascribes itself so closely to popular patriotic imagery and draws upon historical symbols of national identity, Dou's portrait of *The Young Mother* may be interpreted as a secular representation of *The Dutch Maiden*.

Conclusion

Drawing meaning from the signs and symbols contained within a painting has many parallels with the semiotic interpretation of literary texts. Both traditions assume a deeper narrative may be contained within a particular work and that through analysis these meanings can be interpreted and derived. However, the intuitive, unscientific and subjective nature of the iconological approach and the difficulties associated with understanding the artists intended meaning, places obvious constraints upon this form of analysis. While historical and artistic contextualisation may help overcome the issues associated with compound symbolism (Bedaux, 1987), works of art can exhibit a 'plentitude of meanings' (Gombrich, 1985, p.14). Such limitations are recognised when drawing conclusions about the significance of *The Young Mother*.

While Szondi (2008) notes that the roots of public diplomacy can be traced back to at least the 19th century, this paper suggests that *The Gift* to Charles II is evidence of an earlier nexus between nation branding and public diplomacy (Gilboa, 2001). Perhaps reinforcing Olins (2002) and Kunczik, (1997) suggestion that nations have long engaged in image cultivation, ultimately the United Provinces were unsuccessful in their foreign policy goals. Despite the desire to improve commercial relations, English concerns over trade, industry and maritime sovereignty meant that within five years both countries were again at war. In the wake of openly anti-Dutch mercantilist policy, it was acknowledged that the decision to make the offering had been an unjustifiable waste of money (Broekman and Helmers, 2007; Rommelse, 2010). In retrospect, such an outcome is perhaps unsurprising. Contemporary studies have highlighted that where a history of conflict exists between two parties, there remains a need for clearly articulated values and beliefs, open dialogue and a focus upon relationship building (Dinnie and Lio, 2010; Szondi 2009). Moreover, enhancing a nations international image requires time, significant resources as well as a variety of communicative instruments. A single gift or donation by itself, could therefore be expected to have only limited impact.

Whether it was due to the failure of the *Dutch Gift* to achieve its intended aim, the fact that diplomatic efforts were superseded by more significant events or the perceived limitations of Gerrit Dou as an iconographic artist, the importance of *The Young Mother* as a symbolic narrative has generally been overlooked. However, rather than being an image devoid of meaning, this paper has suggested the composition represents a political narrative constructed specifically to extol the virtues of Dutch nationhood. Presented at a time when England was developing its ‘new economic consciousness,’ (Greenfeld 2001, p.43) the painting

acknowledges the Republic's own achievements in global trade and enterprise while simultaneously adhering to its Protestant religious values. In so doing, Dou recognises the United Provinces cultural paradox of valuing the qualities of moderation and wealth creation in equal measure.

While acknowledging *The Young Mother* as being an aesthetic accomplishment fit for a King, this paper has offered an alternative interpretation of the composition and a rationale for its inclusion in *the Gift*. Amongst the symbols of atonement, kinship, cultural enlightenment and spiritual unity that made up the offering to Charles II, lies a visual representation of Dutch nationhood and an example of seventeenth century political propaganda.

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Footnotes

¹ Quoted in Royal Trust Collection. <https://www.rct.uk/collection/themes/exhibitions/charles-ii-art-power/the-queens-gallery-buckingham-palace/the-dutch-gift#:~:text=Upon%20the%20presentation%20of%20the,two%20countries%20were%20at%20war.>

² The term *stofuitdrukking* referred to the realistic rendering of texture and attaining the greatest possible likeness of an object.

³ Such supposition is not without foundation. For example, a reinterpretation of a work by Annibale Carracci has suggested greater political meaning than otherwise prescribed (See Freathy & Thomas, 2021).

⁴ The contemporary association of propaganda with falsehoods and selectively deployed facts has primarily developed since the First World War (1914-1918). Prior to this, it represented a process of sowing and cultivating alternative ways of thinking and stimulating new ideas over the longer term (See Taylor 2003, pp 1-16).

⁵ The Netherlands were recognised for accommodating numerous religious movements and while Calvinism remained the dominant Church it probably accounted for no more than 20% of the population. In addition to a Jewish, Catholic, Mennonite and Lutheran minority, a variety of other sects and confessions were accorded a basic level of religious toleration. However religious toleration was understood as freedom of conscience rather than freedom of religious practice or a form of legal equality.

⁶ Literally “career open to character”.

⁷ The first Anglo-Dutch war (1652-1654) has been directly linked to English mercantilist policy making and was primarily designed to limit Dutch economic expansion.

⁸ By the beginning of the seventeenth century, it was estimated that this exclusive elite (the Regents) comprised approximately two thousand individuals and controlled access to many provincial and republican positions.

⁹ Roughly equivalent to a City Council and primarily comprised individuals drawn from Regent families.

¹⁰ In 1650 Charles had supported a Scottish expedition led by the royalist Marquis of Montrose while at the same time negotiating with the covenanters.

¹¹ The country may have been keen to erase the memory of their reluctance to offer help to the King while in exile in France 1654.

¹² The title of Dou's second work is uncertain, Griffey (2011) has suggested it was *The Tooth Puller* c1630-1635.

¹³ The work *Kunstkroon voor de Koningk van groot Britanje* (1660) was thought to be commissioned by Simon van Hoorn, burgomaster of Amsterdam.

¹⁴ Adam Elsheimer (1578 – 1610) was a German artist who worked in Venice and Rome and specialised in the Italian Baroque style. A previous work, *St Christopher* had been given to his father Charles I. The *Mocking of Ceres* was one of the paintings presented to Charles II

¹⁵ Some maintained that works of such routine existence represented a form of 'low art' and saw genre painting as a revival of rhyparography (the painting of humble objects) that existed in ancient Greece.

¹⁶ Genre realism has not been confined to Europe. For example the artists Kim Hong-do (1745–c. 1806), Shin Yun-bok (1758 - ?) and Kim Deuk-sin (1754–1822) have all been acknowledged for their depictions of everyday scenes in Korea. Similarly in Japan the Ukiyo-e genre, mass produced woodcuts depicting individuals from scenes of city life and was targeted towards those who could not afford original works of art.

¹⁷ If one moves beyond the initial superficiality of the picture itself, the contemporary accuracy of many works remains limited. The clothing worn, the foods consumed and the activities undertaken were often drawn from periods other than that being depicted.

¹⁸ For a discussion on the commodification of the Dutch Art Market in the seventeenth century see de Vries (1996) and van de Woude (1996)

¹⁹ de Jongh described it as a craze that threatened to undermine more prudent iconology (de Jongh, 1996, p.121).

²⁰ The notion that paintings convey symbolic or allegorical meaning is not universally accepted. Some such as Hecht (1992) and Bedaux (1997) have questioned whether Dutch painting contains any hidden message. Those works that seek to communicate specific themes are much more explicit.

²¹ Pliny the Elder records in his *Natural Histories* the rivalry between Zeuxis and Parrhasius, two 5th Century BC painters in Greece. Zeuxis was able to portray grapes so realistically that birds attempted to eat them. In response, Parrhasius painted a curtain that concealed a picture which Zeuxis attempted to open. (See Baer 2000a p.32)

²² The realistic nature of the piece was noted by John Evelyn when viewed in Whitehall in 1660. He described it as, "...painted by Dowe so finely as hardly to be at all distinguish'd from enamel" (enamel), quoted in Hecht, (1992, p.87).

²³ Dou signed the painting on the stained-glass window, a possible acknowledgement to his early training as a glass engraver. The coat of arms on the window has led to speculation that the painting was originally intended

as a wedding gift. It has been identified as belonging to the van Adrichem family from Delft. Magdalena van Adrichem married lawyer Dirk van Beresina in 1652 who died only a year after the marriage. Three months later their son also died after which the painting is thought to have been withdrawn from commission and remained in Dou's studio until viewed by the States delegation. Van der Loeff and Groen (1993) note that such events would explain the unexpected number of *pentimenti* to the composition.

²⁴ Becker suggests that by the 17th century many artists deliberately included a degree of ambiguity into their works in order to elicit different interpretations of the same painting.

²⁵ Acknowledging the presence of the viewer further reinforces the argument that Dou's paintings were compositional devices rather than windows on reality.

²⁶ The Dutch word for bird (vogel) puns with vogelen (intercourse)

²⁷ See also Vermeer's *A Young Woman Standing at a Virginal*, (c 1670) and his restored *Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window* (c1658).

²⁸ See for example Thomas De Keyser's *Constantijn Huygens and His Clerk* (1627)

²⁹ Westermann (2007, p.77) suggests that Dutch audiences did not make a distinction between paintings as art and maps as knowledge.

³⁰ See for example Samuel van Hogstraten *View of a Corridor* (1662), Johannes Vermeer's *Woman with a Water Jug* (1662) and Jacob Ochtervelt's *The Grape Seller* (1669) and *Lady with Servant and Dog* (c1668)

³¹ See for example Claes Jansz Visscher, *Leo Belgicus* (1609)

³² Some shells had specific connotations. For example, oysters were considered objects of lustful intent while mussels were used to symbolise women in the home "each is always in it".

³³ The popular appeal of horticulture was evidenced in one of the first books published in the Netherlands on the subject. Rembert Dodoen's *Cruyde-boeck* (1554) was written in Dutch rather than Latin and reprinted in 1608, 1618 and 1644. Similarly, Jan van den Groen's *De Nederlandse hovenier* published in 1669 was followed by seven more editions.

³⁴ The vegetables shown in many paintings may not have actually grown in the Netherlands, represented produce from an amalgam of different seasons or simply be a product of the artist's imagination. Pieter Cornelisz van Rijck's *Market scene with two figures* (1622) has a range of seasonal products and would have required the artist to sequentially paint or sketch them over a period of time.

The theme of abundance was evident in the works of early Flemish genre artists such as Joachim Beuckelaer (1533 – 1574), Pieter Aertsen (15098 -1575) and Lucas Van Valckenborch (1535-97). Later, artists such as Adriaen van Utrecht (1599 – 1653) and Frans Snyders (1579 –1657) continued this tradition and are credited with the *Pronkstillevens* genre style.

³⁵ Another well-known example is Govert Flinck's 1656 commission for Amsterdam Town Hall. This portrays the consul Manius Curius Denatus turning down gold in favour of turnips. By symbolising an act of modesty and fidelity the painting depicts the virtues through which the city was meant to be governed.

³⁶ Its growth from a provincially important to nationally important symbol reflected the State of Holland's dominance over the other provinces (Chapman, 1986, p.241).