

CHAPTER I: *Introduction*

Dutch painting of the seventeenth century has such a distinctive character that one easily overlooks its ties with the Baroque style as an international phenomenon. Yet the moment one thinks of such artists as Rubens and Bernini, Frans Hals and Velázquez, in juxtaposition, one feels a common denominator. Baroque art, however, seems to defy an all-embracing definition. It finds more eloquent expression in the absolutist Catholic countries than in the Protestant Republic of the United Netherlands. Moreover, the phenomenon of classicism seems to interfere with the international scope of the Baroque movement. Seventeenth-century France is more classicist than Baroque, and in Italy there is a frequent shift from one to the other, even in the careers of individual artists. Rudolf Wittkower, in his *Art and Architecture in Italy 1600-1750 (Pelican History of Art)*, used, we believe, the best way out of this dilemma by dividing the Baroque, as it has often been done, into three successive phases: Early (1600–25), High (1625–75), and Late (1675–1750), and by distinguishing between the classicist manifestations in each of the three phases. In other words, he subordinates the recurrent classicism in Italian art to the progressive waves of the Baroque and allows to each form of classicism its special period aspect.

Holland finds its place in this concept of seventeenth-century art, however, with modifications. Dutch painting can be considered a part of Baroque art, since the latter embraces realism as well as classicism. In the case of Holland, realism is more important than classicism. In the field of painting this widened aspect of the Baroque can best be maintained when we realise that the European leadership lies with Italy only during the early decades (with Caravaggio), shifting in the second generation to Flanders (with Rubens), and about the middle of the century to France (with Poussin and then the style of Louis XIV). This is the course of development which Holland also follows, although at a certain distance and, as we said, with considerable modification. Holland's High Baroque phase, manifested particularly in Rembrandt's work of the 1630s and early 1640s, is closer to Rubens's mature years than to Bernini's, and around the middle of the century the classical influence which found its most conspicuous expression in architecture in Jacob van Campen's great town hall at Amsterdam, which was built as a public monument to the powerful metropolis and is now the royal palace on the city's principal square, was paralleled by certain classical tendencies in the painting of that time.

However, such classification in terms of successive phases of the Baroque does not adequately solve our problem of grouping the Dutch material. Holland's deviation from the international movement – owing to her national and cultural peculiarities – is at least as significant as her participation in it. In Holland alone was to be found the phenomenon of almost an all-embracing realism which was unparalleled in both comprehensiveness and intimacy. The Dutch described their life and their environment, their country and their city sights, so thoroughly that their paintings seem to provide a nearly complete

pictorial record of their culture. However, it was much more than mere reportage. Dutch painters may seduce us into believing that they merely transcribed what was before their eyes. But they were not apes of nature. They always reorganised and selected from nature and the better ones had formidable creative imaginations. Vermeer was not functioning as a human Kodak when he painted his incomparable *View of Delft*. The clouds and light did not stay frozen while he painted them. They are his brilliant pictorial inventions. Moreover, some paintings that can easily appear to modern viewers as straightforward quotidian scenes may include symbolic allusions as well as have a moralising, allegorical or titillating intent that can escape us until we are alerted to them. With or without these added meanings, a sensitive feeling for the painterly beauty of everyday life and nature not infrequently raised the production of Dutch artists to the level of great art.

This new phenomenon of a comprehensive realism, along with a high standard of artistic craftsmanship, may help explain the unusual degree of specialization in subject matter on the part of the individual artist, which in itself constitutes a striking feature of Dutch painting. The new specialization also may be related to the Dutch Calvinist Church's hostility to religious imagery. In earlier times the church had been the Dutch artist's best client. When this was no longer the case artists turned to different subjects. To be sure, some painters continued to depict biblical themes – after all, Rembrandt's most moving pictures are his religious paintings. Traditional historical and mythological subjects continued to be painted as well; however, during the course of the century their rate of production dwindled.

While in a limited field genius could flourish – as the examples of Frans Hals and Vermeer show – the so-called 'Little Masters' often rose to a high rank of originality and quality unequalled in any other country. Thus the total aspect of Dutch painting is not determined by a few great artists, as in Flanders. Genius and talent both have their share, and this makes a simple grouping of the material by great personalities only, or by subject matter, inadvisable. A compromise in this respect does better justice to the situation in Holland. Rembrandt was no less a giant than Rubens, but he did not dominate the whole field in Holland. And Hals and Vermeer had a limited range of influence, in local areas only. Thus the grouping of the material in the pages that follow will be partly by great personalities (Rembrandt, Hals), partly by periods (Mannerism), partly by what can be termed loosely as by local schools (Utrecht, Leiden, Delft), and most frequently by subject matter (genre, landscape, portraiture, and so forth). This will lead to minor overlapping, but the authors thought it best to concede to the phenomena instead of holding rigidly to one system of grouping. The diversity of Dutch painting, which can be seen as an expression of Holland's democratic character, requires such flexibility. History, after all, should not be forced into classifications, but should itself determine the character of its presentation.