Exhibition Reviews


The 2009 focus-show on Judith Leyster could not have had a neater premise. Here was a perfect opportunity to celebrate the four-hundredth anniversary of a lesser-known artist from the Dutch Golden Age who had earned the acclaim of her contemporaries, only to be forgotten until 1893, when Hofstede de Groot ingeniously related the rebus-like signature with an image of a star to her name (Leyster being Dutch for a “leading star” or “comet”). One could surely see the narrative potential of this brief artistic rise, fall into obscurity, and fortuitous rediscovery, especially in view of the paucity of accomplished female artists from Leyster’s cultural moment.

In the twentieth century, it was not until Frima Fox Hofrichter published her PhD dissertation on Leyster as a book in 1989 that the work of this painter received much more sustained consideration. Several years later, in 1993, Leyster was the subject of the first museum exhibition dedicated to her oeuvre, which began in her native Haarlem and then traveled to the United States.

Born in 1609 to a Haarlem mother and a Flemish immigrant father, Judith Leyster showed a degree of precociousness that led to her being mentioned as a “painter of good and keen insight” in Samuel Ampzing’s 1628 Description and Praise of the City of Haarlem in Holland. This distinction is especially noteworthy if we remember that Leyster was just a nineteen-year-old who had yet to be admitted to the Guild of St. Luke. Furthermore, when she joined the guild in 1633, she was the only female artist among thirty-some male members.
Whether or not she studied with Frans Hals, as is traditionally believed, remains uncertain. Yet early portrait studies such as the *Young Boy in Profile* of about 1630 possess a visual exuberance and dynamic execution that support this thesis. Other works, like *The Young Flute Player* of 1635, suggest an equally close affinity with another important stylistic trend of the day represented by the Utrecht followers of Caravaggio. Unfortunately, wherever these two related currents may have led remains mere speculation since, for all practical purposes, Leyster’s development came to an end soon after her 1636 marriage to a fellow artist, Jan Miense Molenaer. Though she probably continued to paint for a while, both independently and in collaboration with her husband, it appears that by her late twenties, her focus was turned to childbearing and other domestic duties, including securing financial support for her family through business ventures in real estate, and possibly even art dealing.5

Because of these uncertainties concerning Leyster’s formative years and the brevity of her career, her surviving works present a number of critical challenges. Some of her earlier paintings often appear more accomplished than those dated later. When she emulates Caravaggio’s signature inventions of dramatically illuminated single figures against plain background, Leyster displays remarkable mastery of composition, anatomy, and foreshortening, as well as striking command of *chiaroscuro*. Thus, in *The Serenade* (1629), she presents a lute-player with a verve that rivals the best examples of this genre by the Utrecht followers of Caravaggio such as Ter Brugghen and Honthorst. Yet a later work like *The Concert* (c. 1632–3) lacks persuasiveness in terms of the depiction of the individual figures as well as in their arrangement into a coherent whole. Granted, such inconsistencies are not uncommon among the juvenilia of even some of the greatest of Leyster’s male peers. What makes them more jarring in her case is simply the absence of a corpus of mature works that they can be set against.

The organizers of this focus-show—the National Gallery of Art curator of northern baroque painting, Arthur K. Wheelock, and Professor Hofrichter from the Pratt Institute—were fully aware of these critical challenges, and also of the merit of returning to Leyster’s oeuvre. For Arthur Wheelock, this focus-show was a logical step within a larger series
of monographic exhibits he has dedicated to Dutch artists of different degrees of renown over the last decade. While some have addressed the works of better known masters, such as Gerrit Dou, Jan Lievens, Aelbert Cuyp, Frans van Mieris, Gerard ter Borch, and Gabriel Metsu, others have returned to painters of more fluid critical fortunes, including Pieter Claesz, Adriaen Coorte, and Hendrick Avercamp. The modest presentation of Judith Leyster brought a welcome female voice to this gathering.

For Frima Fox Hofrichter, this exhibit had even greater professional significance. Notwithstanding Hofstede de Groot’s establishment of Leyster’s identity through the discovery of her “star” signature at the end of the nineteenth century, it was Hofrichter’s life-long study of this painter that led to her inclusion in discussion of the visual culture of seventeenth-century Holland.6

Their joint return to Leyster gained an added interest in view of the mixed reviews of the 1993 retrospective that had been presented in Haarlem and Worcester. One reason for those mixed reviews had to do with the question of attribution. Several works that had been assigned to her prior to the 1993 exhibit (including by Hofrichter) were de-attributed and classified as “circle of Hals.” Museum professionals like Walter Liedtke welcomed this decision, adding that such de-attributions brought into a sharper relief the limitations of Leyster’s oeuvre.7 This evaluation was echoed by other scholars who felt that this exhibition had to bolster itself by including more paintings by Leyster’s Haarlem contemporaries than those attributed to her.8 Even art historians like Elizabeth Honig and Martha Hollander, who can hardly be guilty of traditional biases against female artists, applauded the (male) curators of that show for debunking the myth that Leyster’s curtailed career was necessarily a consequence of her victimhood by patriarchy.9 In addition, they also questioned earlier assumptions about the way in which Leyster’s self-consciousness may have inflected her treatments of various pictorial subjects with a particular gender-based perspective.10

The National Gallery’s mini-retrospective of Leyster took place more than a decade later, in a cultural climate a lot less polarized by identity issues. This was remarked upon by Peter Schjeldahl, who noted that, while a show of a forgotten female artist “would have been a politi-
Exhibition Reviews

265

cal gesture thirty or so years ago,” it could now be finally appreciated for its aesthetic merits. In a similar vein, Karen Wilkin praised this exhibit for its “straightforward presentation of key pictures by an accomplished artist,” free of ideological agendas. Admittedly, these statements betray their own ideological biases. However, these critics (like the reviewers of the 1993 show) should not be misread as advocating a disregard for Leyster’s female voice. What they were reflecting upon was the success of the National Gallery of Art exhibition in showing Leyster’s distinctly female perspective together with a host of other factors that shaped her artistic development.

This contextual approach was evident in a number of respects. One was the presence of comparanda by Frans Hals—especially the Boy Playing a Violin and the Singing Girl— which affirmed Leyster’s debt to this master, even if they did not close the issue concerning their specific relationship. Another was the inclusion of three paintings on musical themes by Leyster’s husband, Jan Miense Molenaer, which demonstrated not only the popularity of this sub-genre in Haarlem, but also the overlay of thematic and stylistic concerns in contemporary artistic discourse.

The presence of seventeenth-century artifacts such as books, prints, and drawings, as well as period instruments including a tenor recorder, transverse flute, and violin, created an even broader cultural framework for Leyster’s imagery. One could follow much more closely how iconographic content travelled across different media, from an emblem book to a painting to a print, and vice-versa. Moreover, the juxtaposition of actual objects to their representations invited viewers to appreciate Leyster’s technical skill in transposing the material world into its painted equivalent and to contemplate the reasons for the premium on exactitude and “realism” in her culture.

That this assembly of objects was displayed in the “cabinet galleries”—a three-part chamber adjacent to the expansive rooms of the National Gallery dedicated to Dutch and Flemish art—was an added benefit. The intimacy of these galleries invited close looking and drove home the point that Leyster’s paintings were created for the domestic spaces of prosperous Dutch citizens and were thus fully informed by their bourgeois ideals.

Whether the curators consciously strove towards this effect or not, their selection of paintings and artifacts from a variety of media was also
in line with the growing emphasis in art history on visual culture, rather than on art with a capital “A.” This shift away from master narratives is consonant with the more recent versions of feminist critique of the canon, in which the search for a re-discovery of great women artists (à la Gentileschi) has been reframed into a search for more nuanced criteria for evaluating the historic contribution of female artists.

However, what this assembly of “high” and “low” art affirmed was that the inclusion of artifacts and documents from an ever expanding field of human experience does not have to lead to a leveling of all “cultural products.” Indeed, if this exhibition proved anything, it was that, while Judith Leyster should not be judged by the yardstick used to evaluate old masters and masterpieces, some of her surviving paintings make it all the more regrettable that she did not pursue painting as seriously and as prolifically as her talent warranted.

This is where a catalogue of critical essays would have been especially welcome, rather than the well-written but summary account by Hofrichter in the accompanying brochure. Now that art historical writing is more methodologically inclusive, we may be able to look far more comfortably at a number of contested issues concerning Leyster’s oeuvre. One is the impact of her gender on her artistic choices, such as her treatment of the erotically charged painting, *The Proposition*, where a female protagonist pursues her virtuous sewing despite her suitor’s advance. While Hofrichter correctly drew attention to the “female” aspect of this pictorial rebuff, our understanding of Leyster’s attitude would benefit from a closer comparison with works by such male artists as Gabriel Metsu, who paints a similar example of female virtue in the face of a salacious offer in *The Hunter’s Gift* (c. 1660). In other words, it may be time to reconsider if *The Proposition* can be both a latently feminist work and one whose moral ambiguity reflects the prevailing taste of the period for interpretive *copia*—whether in painting, poetry, or an emblem book.

Another matter deserving more serious study is Leyster’s varied formal vocabulary. Despite the fact that most of her known works date to her early to mid-twenties, can her diverse pictorial vocabulary tell us something more about the question of style on the Haarlem art scene? One could explore,
for instance, whether or not Leyster’s stylistic inconsistency betrayed her desire to show proficiency in two distinct ways of painting, much-discussed in contemporary Dutch art theory: the “net” (neat) or “fijn” (smooth) manner versus the “ruw” (rough) or “los” (loose) one. In other words, it may be worth considering if her ostensible eclecticism shows her sensitivity to theoretical concerns with decorum, that is, the way in which an artist’s handling of the matter of invention accomplishes specific rhetorical goals.

While evaluating works of art in terms of their “quality” comes with a problematic historic baggage, thinking of quality was simply unavoidable in this exhibition. The Young Flute Player (c. 1630–35), where Leyster evokes the ephemeral pleasure of music (and symbolically painting) with such a sense of absorption in a single instant, calls to mind Vermeer’s images of “time standing still.” Against this exquisitely balanced composition, the music company in The Concert (c. 1630–32) appears more pastiche-like and devoid of persuasive sentiment.

What these and similar contrasts underscored was how difficult it is to resolve even basic issues like attribution and dating of Leyster’s paintings. In a broader sense, this unevenness also affirmed the continued need for connoisseurship in the study of art, as well as for refining the critical terms we use to describe different levels of proficiency by a single artist. Needless to say, these difficulties were highlighted by comparing paintings dated to the same year of her career. Though The Proposition and A Game of Tric-Trac are equally formulaic, the first presents its recherché topic as a richly ambiguous encounter, while the second one leaves nothing to the imagination. In the former, Leyster rises above the didactic expectations of this sub-genre to create a finely nuanced “conversation piece.” In the latter, she leaves us with a humdrum statement that betrays the condition of a painter (even a good one) in the country that gave birth to the first open art market, with all of the benefits and pitfalls of its democratic nature.

It is these complexities of being an artist, and, moreover, a woman in a male-dominated culture, that Judith Leyster seems to smile about as she turns to us from her 1632–1633 Self Portrait. Whereas one of her male counterparts would have likely shown himself with a painting imbued with noble classical topoi, what Leyster seems to tell us through her alter-ego,
the violinist in the “unfinished work” at her easel, is that she harbors few illusions about the ephemeral pleasures of her art.

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Notes

10. Hollander, 543; Honig, 44.
13. On these terms in Dutch art theory, see Thijs Weststeijn, The Visible World: Samuel van Hoogstraten’s Art Theory and the Legitimation of Painting in the Dutch Golden Age (Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2008), 228, 235ff.