

**REFLECTIONS ON HISTORICAL MATERIALISM, ECONOMIC THEORY,  
AND THE HISTORY OF ART IN THE CONTEXT OF RENAISSANCE  
AND 17th CENTURY PAINTING\***

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**Introduction**

In "The German Ideology," written in 1845-1846, Marx and Engels made one of the few explicit statements in their entire oeuvre about determinism in the arts: "Raphael, as every other artist, was conditioned by the technical progress in art that had been realized before him, by the organization of society as well as by the division of labor in his locality and the division of labor in all the countries with which his locality engaged in trade relations. Whether an individual like Raphael develops his talent depends entirely on the demand, which in turn depends on the division of labor and the cultural interconnections to which the latter gives rise" (Marx - Engels, p. 89). In addition to these materialistic determinants of art, Marx and Engels frequently referred to art as the ideological reflection of the class struggle. Their talented epigone G. Plekhanov drew the two strands of the theory together as follows. "If we want to understand a dance performed by Australian indigenes, it suffices that we should know what part is played by the women of the tribe in collecting the roots of wild plants.(1) But a knowledge of the economic life of France in the eighteenth century will not explain to us the origin of the minuet. In the latter case we have to do with a dance which is an expression of a nonproductive class... We must not forget, however, that the development of that society" (Plekhanov, p. 61).

Engels, toward the end of his life, recognized explicitly the feedback of political, philosophic, religious, literary, and artistic development on the "economic base," yet, in his famous letter to Hans Starkenburg of 1894 (Marx-Engels, pp. 6-7), he still asserted that the interaction (*Wechselwirkung*) between base and superstructure rested "in the last analysis on economic necessity" (*auf Grundlage der in letzter Instanz stets sich durchsetzenden ökonomischen Notwendigkeit*). Plekhanov, who was influenced by Kant's aesthetics, allowed that the appreciation of art could be "completely

disinterested,” even though “utility... lies at the basis of aesthetic pleasure” (cited in Demetz, p. 196). Such syncretistic - more or less inconsistent - views were typical of the first adherents to the doctrine of historical materialism in the arts.

In the last years of the 19th century and the first few years of the 20th, the grand hypotheses developed by Marx and Engels gave birth to, or at least substantially influenced, a host of historical-material writings on the arts.(2) By the time the more definitive statements of Frederick Antal and Arnold Hauser were published, in 1947(3) and 1951 respectively, the heyday of such speculations was long over. The study of the economic and social background of art had given way to the “new criticism” whose adepts concentrated on the visible, palpable, audible products of the artist - the painting, the sculpture, the piece of music - and paid much less attention to the environment in which these works arose.

Present-day economic analysis of the arts has in common with the Marxist approach the study of the “materialist basis,” but it is far more explicit in tracing the links between this basis and supply-and-demand conditions in the market. On the other hand, it is less concerned with the formation of consumers’ preferences, which it generally takes as given. I will first contrast the two approaches in independent attempts to explain the simultaneous production of “progressive” and “retardataire” art in 15th century Florence and Siena. I will then extend the analysis to Dutch art before and after the Reformation. The remainder of the paper is given over to the applications of economic principles in accounting for some well-known phenomena in Dutch 17th century art.

### **Renaissance Art**

In his major study of the Florentine Renaissance Antal suggested that, to understand the sharply contrasting styles of the painters Masaccio and Gentile Fabriano, contemporaries both living in Florence, or in general to account for the origins and nature of co-existent styles, one must “study the various sections of society, reconstruct their philosophies and thence penetrate to their art.” Since these “various sections of society” were apt to “split up in various often antagonistic groupings,” some of these stylistic differences

could be traced to the class struggle (p. 4). Thus Masaccio, whose style is “matter of fact, sober, and clearcut” painted for the “rising bourgeoisie, the masters in the greater guilds.” Gentile painted with courtly decorum in an ornate, delicate, mystical style pictures that appealed to his patrons - princes, aristocrats, enobled burghers, high-rank ecclesiasts - steeped in the old knightly culture of Gothic Europe (p. 311). Masaccio, who represented the “peak of upper-bourgeois rationalism,” a peak that could be reached only “under the rule of a victorious upper middle class,” was too extreme in his “progressive” art to attract a large clientele. Barely intelligible to the average middle-class citizen of his day, he died heavily in debt (p. 310). Gentile, retardaire if not reactionary, was highly successful.

Antal does not satisfactorily explain for what reason Masaccio, the vehicle of progress, should have lacked clients. If his style was adapted to the tastes of a victorious bourgeoisie, why should it have appealed to so few of his potential customers? He fails to draw a clear distinction between works of art that are progressive because they were made under the influence of a cultural climate associated with a newly emergent class and those that are so because they were produced directly for the members of such a class. The first notion may be regarded as a compromise between Hegelian spiritualism and Marxist materialism; the latter seems more consistent with the views of Marx and Engels filtered through Plekhanov.

By a curious coincidence, the problem that Antal posed - the influence of class-based patronage on style in the Renaissance - resurfaced recently with no acknowledgment to earlier ideas on the subject. Virginia Lee Owen, in the very first number of the *Journal of Cultural Economics* (1977), came out with an article entitled “The Florentine and Siense Renaissance: A Monopsonistic Explanation.” The contrast between the Florentine and Siense styles that she tried to account for in terms of differences in market structure was analogous to that which Antal had drawn between Masaccio and Gentile. Masaccio was a good representative of the Florentine emphasis on “perspective, rational construction, secularization.” The stylistic characteristics of Gentile, a Florentine of Umbrian origin, were not very different from those of outstanding Siense painters of the 15th century as Owen describes them: linear rather than volumetric, elegant rather than powerful. Both Gentile and the Siense remained close to the old “Gothic”

style and failed - assuming that was a desirable thing to do - to follow the main trends of the Renaissance. The reason, according to Owen, lay in the monopsonistic or oligopsonistic structure of both markets and in the fundamental difference in tastes of the individuals exercising dominant patronage in Florence and Siena: rationalistic merchants in the former, rural landlords with a preference for traditional religious values and styles in the latter (Owen, p. 54). This article, together with a comment by Rojer McCain (1977) and a rejoinder by Owen (1978), marks the first systematic application of economic analysis to art history. The following analysis in part supplements, in part modifies the ideas put forward by Owen and McCain.

### Patronage and Competitive Markets

If we suppose that artists may engage in progressive work, denoted  $h^e$ , or in retardataire or routine work, denoted  $h^i$ , three sets of preferences must be considered to deal effectively with Owen's problem: 1) the preferences of artists over income  $z$ ,  $h^e$ , and  $h^i$ ; 2) the preferences of consumers in a competitive market over the products of the two types of work; 3) the preferences of a hypothetical monopsonist over these same products. A production function relating the output of e-goods (progressive) and i-goods (retardataire or routine) to  $h^e$  and  $h^i$  must also be posited.

We may assume that

$$\frac{\delta u}{\delta h^e} \quad \text{and} \quad \frac{\delta u}{\delta h^i} < 0.$$

where  $u$  is a representative artist's utility function with arguments  $z$ ,  $h^e$ , and  $h^i$ , for all relevant choices.<sup>(4)</sup> We also assume, for initial simplicity, that  $h^e = e$  and  $h^i = i$  where  $e$  and  $i$  are the outputs of the two types of art goods resulting from the two types of work.

Several combinations of representative preferences need to be considered. To begin with, suppose: (1) For all likely combinations of  $h^e$  and  $h^i$ , the marginal rate of substitution between  $z$  and  $h^i$  is greater than between  $z$  and  $h^e$ . (It takes a larger increment of  $z$  to compensate the artist for an extra unit of  $i$  - than for a unit of e-work.) (2) Some consumers in a competitive

market for e and i would prefer e and some i.

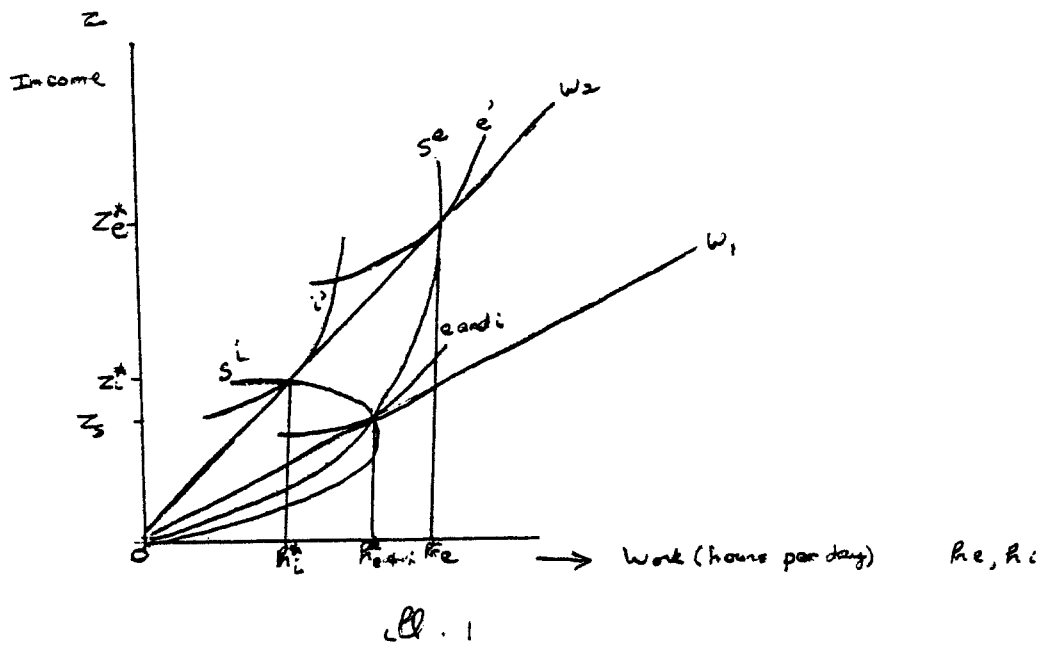
Given conditions (1) and (2), unless the preference of artists for  $h^e$ -work over  $h^i$ -work were very strong, some of both would be produced in a competitive market. In general those artists whose relative aversion for i-work was weak would produce i-goods for consumers whose relative preference for the latter was strong.

If we relax the productivity assumption that  $h^e = e$  and  $h^i = i$  we see that the mix produced in a competitive market will also crucially depend on the ability of artists to transform  $h^e$  into e and  $h^i$  into i. Irrespective of the preferences of Florentine and Sienese citizens, it may be that the differences in the observed mix were simply due to the fact Florentine artists were much better at doing  $h^e$ -work and the Sienese at  $h^i$ -work (for reasons that can only be explained by intellectual history). Only strong relative aversion on the part of Florentine artists to doing  $h^i$ -work or of patrons to consuming e-goods would then prevent the Florentine market from being dominated by these “progressive” works.

Let us now supplant the competitive market by a monopsonist with strong relative preferences for e- over i-goods (e.g. a Medici prince in the spirit of Owen’s analysis). It is immediately obvious that only e-goods will be produced (provided of course the productivity of artists in producing i-goods was not much higher than in producing e-goods.) For any i-goods to be produced at all, it would have to be assumed, contrary to (1) above, that at least some artists found it particularly irksome to work on e-goods.

But the contrast between monopsony and competition in the buyers’ market need not depend on the heterogeneity of consumers’ preferences in the competitive alternative. A “monopsony effect” may also emerge where the marginal rate of substitution between the two types of work,  $\frac{\delta u}{\delta h^i} / \frac{\delta u}{\delta h^e}$ , depends critically on the level of income. If, in particular, this MRS declines continuously toward unity as the artist’s income diminishes toward subsistence, then a monopsonist with a relative preference for the more irksome i-works may induce artists to produce relatively more of these goods than they would under competitive market conditions. This point is illustrated below. A portion of a representative artist’s preference map, in the three-dimensional space of  $z$ ,  $h^i$ , and  $h^e$ , is represented in two-dimensions in the diagram.

Labour Supply Responses to Two Levels of Prices



### Diagram I

In three-dimensional space,  $h_e$  and  $z$  would be measured in the horizontal and vertical directions of the paper plane respectively and  $h_i$  would be perpendicular to the plane. In the diagram, however, indifference curves in  $(h_i, z)$  space have been projected onto  $(h_e, z)$  space, so that the abscissa of the diagram measures both  $h_e$  and  $h_i$ . Indifference curve  $e'$ , located in  $(h_e, z)$  space and indifference curve  $i'$  located in  $(h_i, z)$  space do not cross since they belong to different spaces. It is assumed that  $e'$  lies on an indifference surface higher than  $i'$ . On the other hand indifference curves "e and i" are identical curves in the  $(h_e, z)$  and  $(h_i, z)$  quadrants both lying on the same three-dimensional surface. The idea of this representation is that at low levels of hourly remuneration for his work, shown by the line  $w_1$  from the origin, the artist is concerned only with achieving subsistence income  $z_s$ : to keep body and soul together he will labor the same number of hours on either type of work as long as he gets the same pay for each. At a higher remuneration  $w_2$  he can afford to indulge his preference for doing e-type work; he will perform  $h_e^*$  hours of it, earning  $z_e^*$ , and none of the other (if he has the opportunity to do both), and he will get paid for either type at rate  $w_2$ . If only the more irksome type of work is available however, he will work  $h_i^*$  and earn  $z_i^*$ . He may do some of both and earn between  $z_e^*$  and  $z_i^*$  if the price paid for work of the tedious-type exceeds that for the more enjoyable of the two.

Assume first that all artists have the same preferences over  $z$ ,  $h_e$ , and  $h_i$  and that clients in a competitive market all prefer the products of i-work over the products of e-work. If the demand for either type of work is great enough to provide artists with an income above  $z_s^*$ , the price for i-type works will rise above the price for e-type works. We would expect customers with larger incomes to buy mainly i-works while some of the less well-off buyers will have to content themselves with e-work.

Suppose instead that the artists were all selling their works to a single buyer, or a coalition of buyers acting as a monopsonist, as Virginia Owen argues was the case both in Florence and Siena. Suppose also that the single buyer or coalition had an income equal to the aggregate income of all the competitive buyers in the previous example. The monopsonist with a relative

preference for i-work (e.g. the Catholic Church or the municipality in Siena which commissioned mainly retardataire i-work) would be able to get better terms for their purchases of art works than in a competitive market, provided one or the other was willing to pay at least prices corresponding to subsistence remuneration  $w_1$ . (At a price below  $w_1$ , artists would presumably engage in another occupation.) The monopsonist would be able to elicit  $h^*$  or  $h^*$  hours of work on i - or e - type products for a price lower than  $w_2$ . But as the income of any of our identical artists was reduced from  $z^*$  toward  $z^*$ , his relative preference for performing e-work over i-work would diminish, until it vanished at subsistence price  $w_1$ . Thus, other things equal, the artist would be more willing to adapt his mix to the single buyer's tastes than to clients in a competitive market. Irrespective of market structure, the higher the prices an artist can get for his work, the less forthcoming we would expect him to be in meeting irksome demands .(5)

The situation just analyzed does not seem very realistic in the historical context of Florence and Siena. For there is no evidence whatever that the Medicis in the former and the Catholic Church or the municipality in the latter used their monopsony power to induce artists to work on products or projects that they would not have wished to produce had they been operating in a competitive environment. It is much more likely, as I have already argued, that if monopsony power was exercised at all that it simply tilted demand toward the kind of works the most powerful patron in the two cities wished to have produced (and which artists were just as willing to produce as those that ordinary consumers might have demanded). The income effect of monopsony power on the mix of art goods may have been a more important factor in the case of church patronage in the Netherlands in 16th century art discussed in the next section.

#### **Church Patronage in 16th Century Holland**

In mid-16th century Delft, a few years before the Protestant rebellion separated the Northern Provinces of the Netherlands from Flanders and Brabant which remained loyal to Catholic Spain, artists were almost completely dependent for their livelihood on Church patronage. The Church bought all manner of art goods and services that made the members of the congregation more receptive to its religious message. Paintings, sculpture,



colored windows, and music were part and parcel of the propagation of the faith (as entertainment is jointly supplied with advertising on free television today). The combination of art and religion dispensed had to please the majority of the faithful who contributed their alms and left money in their estates to pay for the provision of these public goods. There is at least as good a case for the argument that the median donor determined the kind and the amount of artistic decoration as for the familiar conjecture according to which the median voter is supposed to determine the supply of public goods in a democracy.

With the exception of a few rich citizens who had their portraits painted, the private demand for arts works was almost nonexistent. The evidence available in the list of expenditures for the reconstruction of the New Church, which had been almost totally destroyed by fire in 1536, and in the accounts of the guild of St. Lucas (wherein painters, glassmakers, and other representatives of the art trades were organized) reveals that there were two distinct categories of individuals selling their artistic services or their products to the Church: 1) local artisans who generally worked for modest day wages or performed services on order for specific sums that were apparently calculated on the basis of ordinary wage rates and 2) eminent artists, virtually all of them out-of-towners, who received very high prices for the work they performed. The first category working close to the margin of subsistence and with very limited alternative opportunities of employment, was willing to let their ecclesiastic employer set the tasks they were slated to work on - carve a figure of Adam in limewood, gild a sculptured Pieta, or paint the benches in the choir. Their earnings did not exceed one and a half to two times those of ordinary masons and their helpers, even though they were full-fledged masters in the guild and, in some cases, were qualified enough to train pupils who themselves acquired a wider reputation (e.g. the painter Jan Lucas, the teacher of Maerten van Heemskerck).<sup>(6)</sup> The out-of-towners, on the other hand, generally enjoyed a reputation throughout the Netherlands that enabled them to escape the virtual monopsony of the Church authorities in Delft, as various towns vied for their services. They did not enter into an employment relation with their work-givers but produced on contract, as our model would have led us to expect, considering the competitive conditions in

the market for their services and the greater remuneration they could demand for their skills. Some of these contracts have survived. They specify both the quality of the inputs - type of wood or stone for the sculptures, nature of the "ashes" used in the paints and adhesive material - as well as the output the religious scene to be represented, the preparatory sketch (*vidimus*) that must be shown to patrons for approval before the final project could get started, and the overall standard of performance, which was often that of some other work that had already been accomplished by the artist in another town.(7) A premium for quality performance was usually written into the contract to insure a high standard. This premium, amounting to 10 to 15 percent of the contracted sum, was paid upon completion of the project provided the Church fathers were satisfied. Finally, upon installation of the altarpiece or tabernacle in the church, it was not unusual to give the out-of-town master a feast. In one documented case, the feast was paid by the master's Delft colleagues under the auspices of the guild of St. Lucas.

We now turn to economic factors other than market structure that affected the development of Dutch art.

Church patronage in the Netherlands went on unabated in the 1550s and early 1560s at a time when religious ferment was seriously calling into question the appropriateness of many of the art works commissioned. Images of God, Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the Saints were viewed as "idolatrous" by many Protestants, but especially by the Calvinists whose influence was rising among the common people. In the summer of 1566, fanatical opponents of graven images destroyed all the colored windows, sculptures, and paintings they could reach with their hammers and tongs throughout the Northern and Southern Provinces of the Netherlands. Almost everyone of the painted altarpieces that had adorned the churches, hospices, and convents of Delft disappeared, either in 1566 or soon afterwards.

In the late 1560s the rebellion against Spain spread throughout Holland and Friesland. In 1571 Delft joined the league of cities united against Spain under the leadership of William of Orange. As soon as the Calvinists had won control of the town's churches, they proceeded to rid them of the last vestiges of "popish idolatry": they sold for a pittance the altarpieces and tabernacles that had escaped the wrath of the iconoclasts in 1566 and in the

intervening years.(9) They had the walls painted white. The church interiors acquired the austere, Puritan appearance they have had ever since in Holland.

It is important to observe, for the argument that follows, that the iconoclasts made up a minority of the population. Perhaps as many as half of the population of Delft remained Catholic. Among the Protestants, Arminian Calvinists, Lutherans, and other sects who were far less opposed to traditional church decoration than the orthodox (Gomarist) Calvinists probably represented a majority. Town patricians who considered themselves good Calvinists, such as the chronicler of Delft, Dirck Evertsz. van Bleyswijck (1667), deplored in later years the ravages of the iconoclasts.

My argument consists of three propositions: 1) The art works displayed in churches before 1566 met the preferences of the better-off members of the congregation who paid for them through their donations; 2) the destruction of images by the iconoclasts left a gap or unsatisfied demand for religious art in the population; 3) individuals who could afford to do so bought paintings and sculptures as private substitutes for the public goods they (or their fathers) had once enjoyed. This three-pronged hypothesis is a straightforward application of Burt Weisbrod's idea (1975) that individuals whose latent demand for public goods exceeds the amounts available and who can afford to do so buy private substitutes for them (e.g. bodyguards or a security system in lieu of inadequate police protection.)

The evidence is slim but suggestive. Private collecting seems to have increased greatly in the last third of the 16th century and the opening decades of the 17th. It now embraced small merchants and master-artisans of the type who probably had not owned any works of art to speak of before. Over 40 percent of the paintings in the Delft inventories I analyzed for the first 20 years of the 17th century represented religious subjects, which of course would have been the best substitutes for the church works that had disappeared.

The hypothesis could conceivably be tested along the following lines if the data were available. Assume that the incomes and preferences of churchgoers for art goods were the same in Holland, which became Protestant, and in Flanders, which remained Roman Catholic. In Holland, as we have seen, church art almost totally disappeared after the onslaughts of the iconoclasts. In Flanders, the works that had been destroyed were promptly replaced, and

church art continued to flourish in the 17th and 18th centuries. (The painters Rubens, van Dyck, Jordaens, and the sculptors A. Quellinus and Duquesnoy were among the most distinguished of the artists who lent their talents to the Catholic Church in the 17th century.) One would then expect that private collecting would not have developed as rapidly in the Catholic South as in the Protestant North. I have no direct evidence from inventories, but it is probably significant that exports of cheap art works from Flanders flooded Holland during the early 17th century (Montias, 1981, Ch. 2). It remains unclear whether the excess of supply over domestic demand in Flanders was due mainly to the more rapid development of private collections in the North (in line with my conjecture) or contrary to my assumption about incomes being the same in the two regions, to a decline in Flemish demand resulting from war and destruction. (War and destruction undoubtedly had a more profound and lasting effect in the Southern Provinces than in the rebellious North.) While my hypothesis cannot be tested with the data presently available it may still help focus and organize the search for additional evidence.

#### **The Art Market in 17th Century Holland**

By the beginning of the 17th century, Dutch artists depended almost completely for their livelihood on a private clientele. The patronage of the Court of the Princes of Orange in The Hague was on a very small scale compared to the lavish expenditures on art of the Kings of France and England. Only a few painters of "histories" (religious, mythological, and classical-history scenes) profited from the Prince's largess. The Church was now virtually inactive as a buyer or commissioner of art. The inventories of the estates of painters who died in Delft contain many finished pictures - too many to have been produced "on commission." Most artists had a stock in trade from which they supplied not only private customers but dealers who became more important in the 1630s and 1640s as the market widened. Another correlate of the market's expansion was, as we would expect, increased specialization. In contrast to the 16th century when artists in Delft had either painted "histories" or portraits, specialists in landscape (Willem van den Bundel, Pieter van Asch), flowers (Wouter Vosmaer), fruit still-lives (Cornelis Delff), architecture (B. van Bassen), battles (P. Palamedes), and

genre scenes (Anthony Palamedes) began to occupy an important place in the market. As the century wore on, the proportion of these painters in the guild of St. Lucas continued to gain ground at the expense of the painters of "histories." This trend was reflected in Delft collections. In the decade 1610-1619, for instance, "histories" made up 46 percent of the subjects represented in my sample of Delft inventories, and landscapes of all sorts 25 percent. By the 1660s, the former had declined to 26 percent while the latter had increased to 37 percent.<sup>(10)</sup> Furthermore, by that time, many pictures with a religious content that I have included among the "histories" were actually landscapes with small-scale "staffage" barely suggesting their Biblical symbolism (e.g. Mary and Joseph on the way to Bethlehem shown in the middle ground of a lush Southern landscape).

While these changes in the makeup of collections primarily reflected a new structure of demand, they were probably also reinforced by a factor on the supply side. To produce an acceptable "history," dominated by large-size figures, of the kind rich patrons had bought in the sixteenth century (and continued to buy on a small scale in the seventeenth), a painter had to be able to draw human anatomy correctly. He had to clothe his characters in a recognizable and attractive way. According to Karel van Mander, the chronicler of 16th and early 17th century dutch art "histories" were the most demanding but also the most praiseworthy subjects (Blankert, 1980, pp. 18-19). Landscape, per contra, required less time,<sup>(11)</sup> as well perhaps as less skill. From about 1610 on, Haarlem artists such as Esaias van de Velde began to paint a more "painterly" type of landscape - in contrast to the more linearly precise (and time-consuming) landscape of the previous generation - which quickly became popular among painters in other cities and in the Dutch market as a whole. These pictures must surely have been cheaper to produce than those they displaced.

This apparent trend in the costs of producing paintings, which allowed artists to find new outlets in middle-income and lower-middle income groups, was paralleled in two other industries: tapestry-making and faience or Delftware. Tapestries were manufactured in Delft in the early part of the 17th century by Franchoy's Spierinx and, a little later by Karel van Mander II, the son of the famous writer on Dutch and Flemish art. Those tapestries, which typically cost 30 to 40 guilders an ell (27 inches), were bought by the

States General (the federal government of the United Provinces) for gifts to kings and other potentates with whom the young republic wished to entertain good relations or, exceptionally, by very wealthy individuals. The designs were intricate, the materials (wool, silk, gold and silver thread) gorgeous. From the 1640s, Maximiliaen van der Gucht was the only manufacturer of any significance left in town. He produced tapestries at 18 guilders an ell. Designs were now simpler and easier to “read.” Materials, while still of good quality, were much less costly. Some of these tapestries were bought for the townhalls of Netherlandish cities and by rich patricians. But van der Gucht also made some woven fabrics to upholster armchairs and to make cushions that any reasonably well-off individual could afford. Tiles made by Delftware manufacturers underwent a similar - and indeed a more marked - evolution from a luxury to a commonly affordable product. Around 1610, they were painted “all over” in polychrome colors on a thick, sturdy body. Thirty or forty years later, only a small portion of the tile was painted in the single color blue on a white background. The product was also thinner and more brittle. The early tiles cost about 3 stuivers a piece; the price of the newer tiles had been brought down to one or one and a half stuivers, this in a period of slightly rising prices (Montias, 1981, Ch. 9).

To conclude, while changes in tastes and fashion probably had most to do with new trends in representation and technique both in the major and the minor arts, supply-side factors helped to spread the new products more broadly, among new categories of collectors, than if “pure” demand shifts had occurred. The lowering of production costs, in the case of tapestry manufacturing, probably took the form of a cut in quality standards within the known technology of the period. The cost of tiles was reduced in part as a result of technical progress (the potters’ ability to produce a thinner body), in part as a result of the simplification of designs. In their attempt to widen the market for paintings, artists produced a new type of painterly landscape and still-life a sort of labor-saving innovation that cannot be entirely disassociated from changes in quality.

A new phenomenon began to affect the Dutch art market in the late 1650s. The trend initiated a generation earlier toward painterly, quickly executed paintings was reversed, and high-quality artists began to find buyers

at exorbitant prices for exquisitely detailed “cabinet pictures.” The new school of “fine painting” was launched in Deventer by Gerard Ter Borch and in Leyden by Gerard Dou (a former pupil of Rembrandt) and Frans van Mieris, who averaged 800 to 1,000 guilders for each of their pictures (Naumann, 1981), compared to 10-25 guilders for typical pieces by well-established guild masters in the rapidly executed mode. The fashion soon spread to other cities, including Delft where Johannes Vermeer brought the genre to a pinnacle of artistic perfection, although he never received prices quite as high as Dou or van Mieris or, for that matter, emulated their meticulousness.(12)

Beyond the vicissitudes of taste, what could have prompted the infatuation of the upper classes with “fine painting”? One idea is that painterly pieces à la van Goyen (landscapes), Anthony Palamedes (genre pieces) or Pieter Claesz, (still-lives) had become too common. Upper middle-class homes were full of them. The “fine painters” offered the rich an opportunity to acquire a new status symbol: minutely executed paintings whose high cost was immediately apparent to connoisseurs. The “fine painters” might not have been as successful in the 1660s if it had not been also for the increasing number of wealthy Amsterdam and Leyden merchants and manufacturers who could afford their work. (While the data are not available to prove the point, I have a distinct impression that income distribution had become more unequal by then than a generation or two earlier).

It is commonly asserted that the Dutch school of painting fell into decline soon after the invasion of the Netherlands by the troops of Louis XIV in 1672. There is little doubt that the economic upsurge of the previous 70 years was brought to a sudden halt. The stagnation of the market in the 1670s probably afflicted painters even more than most other artisans (owing to the high income elasticity of demand for their wares).(13) The fashion for French painting is also said to have adversely affected the demand for pictures by Dutch artists. These are perhaps sufficient causes for the decline of the Dutch School. At the risk of overdetermining the phenomenon, I may add one more conjecture. The trend toward classical qualities of order and clarity which was actually brought to its apogee by the new school of “fine painting” affected not only the composition of pictures but also their place in the decorative scheme of the interiors of Dutch homes. It was no longer as

fashionable as it had once been for wealthy people to hang many paintings on their walls: the overall effect was too disorderly. A preference now set in for wall coverings of Cordoba leather, blue and white tiles, and other more or less uniform backdrops against which pictures did not look as well as against the whitewashed walls of the past. There might still be a niche here, a blank space there for a small cabinet picture of high quality, but this demand could be satisfied by a few artists. Indeed, the artists who could meet the demand for such meticulously painted works continued to prosper even in the 1670s and 1680s, while the mass of painters who were able to turn out only run-of-the-mill landscapes or ordinary flower pieces found the going increasingly hard. The number of their apprentices fell off. By the end of the century there was little left of the once flourishing school of Dutch painting.

#### **A Tentative Conclusion**

The history of art in the last generation or so has concerned itself chiefly with ideas, subjects, influences, and fashions, in short, with spirit rather than matter - the belated triumph of Hegel over Feuerbach and Marx. Far from me to pretend that I have turned the tables on the Hegelians: most of the phenomena dealt with in this paper can reasonably well be explained with the tools of intellectual history. What I hope I have shown is that a detailed knowledge of the material circumstances under which artists and artisans earned their living may point to alternative explanations or to more precise causative sequences for these phenomena. I also hope that my conjectures may suggest interesting research questions. To pick up a favorite idea of Marx, there is a dialectic relation between the realm of spirit and the realm of matter. Neither can be fully apprehended without the other.

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#### **FOOTNOTES**

\* I am grateful to Anver Ben-Ner and Susan Rose-Ackerman for their useful comments on an earlier draft.

1. Plekhanov (p. 61) had theorized a few lines earlier that the dance



performed by “Australian Blackfellows” was a “reproduction of the activities of the same tribesmen when engaged in collecting roots.”

2. On the influence of Marx and Engels on turn-of-the-century literature, see Demetz (1959); for a good representative of the interest in material aspects of the arts, see Floerke (1905).

3. Antal's book was actually written between 1932 and 1938, but its publication was held up because of the war.

4. Even if artists derive positive utility from some hours of work, it is likely that, if they earn their living from their craft, they will exert themselves to a point where extra units of work will lower their utility. That this is probably so can be inferred from the marked decline in productivity of Dutch painters such as Ferdinand Bol and Jacob van Velsen who married into money half way through their career. I suspect similar examples can be found for the Italian Renaissance.

5. Two offer curves,  $s^e$  and  $s^i$ , are drawn in ill. 1 showing the supply response of the artist for i- and e-work as the terms for the two types of work vary. If we again assume that  $h_e = e$  and  $h_i = i$ , then the monopsonist will equate his MRS for income and i and his MRS for income and e to the slope of the first and second offer curves respectively. If his preferences for the two goods are the same, he will buy more of the good in elastic supply (e) than of the one in inelastic supply (i), even where the representative artist's preferences between income and i-work are identical with his preferences between income and e-work (at low levels of remuneration). So, to be precise, we should say that the monopsonist with a preference for i-work will buy *relatively* more of these goods than would a competitive market. For him to buy nothing but i-goods, even if he can impose terms that would reduce artists' incomes to a subsistence level, his preference for i-work would have to be very strong. This relation between elasticity of supply and monopsonist's demand is discussed in a different guise by Virginia Owen (1977 pp. 37-39).

6. The decision to enter into an “employment relation” may indicate an individual's indifference among the tasks that he might be ordered to perform or a willingness to surrender the right to choose among them in exchange for a greater remuneration than if he had retained this choice. On the demand side, the decision of the church to employ local artists rather than to contract for their services to perform a variety of tasks may be explained, a la Oliver

Williamson (1973), by the difficulty of specifying in one or more contract the detailed performance characteristics expected of them in accomplishing a wide gamut of possible tasks. Hiring artists on a steady basis gave the church far more flexibility in getting things done than if it had signed a contract for each assignment.

7. When the famous painter Jan van Scorel, for example, was engaged by the Old Church in Delft to paint an altarpiece, the contract specified it was to "exceed in magnificence" the altarpiece he (van Scorel) had painted for the Cathedral in Utrecht (van Bleyswijck, p. 248).

8. The occasion was the installation of Maerten van Heemskerck's altarpiece painted for the New Church in Delft in 1551 (Montias, 1981).

9. The van Heemskerck altarpiece was sold for five Flemish pounds or about 30 guilders. It had probably cost over 200 guilders (for details, see Montias, 1981, Ch. 1).

10. See Montias, 1981, Ch. 8. The samples consist of 473 paintings in the decade 1610-1619 and 1640 in the decade 1660-1669. The trends are quite regular from decade to decade.

11. The speed with which famous painters of landscapes such as van Goyen and Jan Porcellis could polish off a picture was legendary.

12. Gerard Dou is said to have spent three working days to paint a broomstick - hardly larger than a fingernail (Joachim Sandrart cited in Naumann, 1981).

13. The depression of the 1670s forced several Delftware manufacturers to go out of business (Montias, 1981, Ch. 9).

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