

Reconsidering the Lacemaker: Analyzing Systems of Class, Gender, and Power in Caspar Netscher's *Lacemaker* (1662)

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Although Dutch genre paintings have garnered increased scholarly attention in recent years, Caspar Netscher's *Lacemaker* (Figure 1) from 1662 is rarely mentioned in the scholarship on seventeenth-century Dutch art.¹ The few published studies of the painting reach the same conclusion: it portrays a middle-class housewife as a straight-forward example of ideal feminine domestic virtue. However, previously overlooked ambiguities in Netscher's painting suggest that the figure and her identity are more complex. The young woman's elegant, red bodice, jeweled hair pin, and embroidered cap or *coif* point to middle-class status. Yet the bodice appears too large for her. The green skirt paired with it is sturdy rather than fashionable, and her discarded shoes are worn, suggesting the figure is a member of the working class. The environment is clean, as though the woman has made use of the broom at the left, yet two discarded shells—mussels, a Dutch culinary staple—appear in the lower right foreground, as if she missed them.² The landscape print on the back wall is unceremoniously nailed to the wall, and the once-pristine print is creased to suggest that it was once folded. Its hilly terrain and thick woods contrast with the low-lying topography of the northern Netherlands, where forests are scarce.³ On the whole, the scene is a puzzling collection of contrasts, and the compositional details create uncertainty rather than clarity for understanding this space and the woman it depicts.

This article is adapted from the author's Master's thesis, a digital research capstone presented through an OMEKA website. The full version can be found here: <https://omeka.library.american.edu/s/netscherlacemaker>.

1 For example, Ann Sutherland Harris touches on paintings of virtue that depict housewives and maidservants without mentioning Netscher at all in her survey text of seventeenth-century art. Ann Sutherland Harris, *Seventeenth-Century Art and Architecture* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005). One could also note the number of books or exhibitions dedicated to other artists from this time period—Nicolaes Maes, Pieter de Hooch, Gabriel Metsu, countless to Johannes Vermeer, to name a few—while Caspar Netscher has yet to receive such a retrospective since Marjorie Wieseman's catalogue raisonnée in 2002.

On the other hand, Wayne E. Franits does mention Netscher and discuss the *Lacemaker* in some detail, though he builds on his earlier analysis of the work in his book from over ten years prior, *Paragons of Virtue*. Wayne E. Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting: Its Stylistic and Thematic Evolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); Wayne E. Franits, *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

2 J.L. Price, "Water and Land," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Dutch Golden Age*, edited by Helmer J. Helmers and Geert H. Janssen, 33–4. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

3 Price, "Water and Land," 36.

I contend that these contrasts are crucial for interpreting the image to align most convincingly with the social and cultural concerns of Netscher and his contemporaries. By analyzing the visual evidence provided by the artist within the sociohistorical context of the work, I argue that the *Lacemaker* represents not a Dutch housewife as specialists have maintained, but rather a German immigrant and a maidservant working in a middle-class household. By placing a working-class migrant at the core of this painting, Netscher challenged the conception that Dutch genre paintings should construct and reinforce ideals of feminine domesticity as a singularly middle-class sensibility and achievement, ideals evinced by many works of his contemporaries.⁴ He also challenged biased views about outsider identities in circulation in the Dutch Republic. Given the negative stereotypes of both maidservants and German migrants in the mid-seventeenth century, Netscher portrayed this figure in a revolutionary manner: as a woman who is caught between cultures, yet, like Dutch women, possessive of industriousness and virtue and worthy of the viewer's respect.⁵

The limited scholarship on both Caspar Netscher and his *Lacemaker* highlight the intriguing nature of this frequently overlooked painting. While the popularity of Johannes Vermeer has re-enlivened attention to the artist and some

4 Contemporaries such as Johannes Vermeer and Pieter de Hooch illustrated the norms and ideals of feminine domesticity that were typical of seventeenth-century Dutch genre paintings, examples by both of whom will be discussed in detail throughout this article. Scholars have touched on this quality in genre paintings of this period, such as H. Perry Chapman's discussion of Vermeer's women or Ann Sutherland Harris' commentary on Nicolaes Maes and Pieter de Hooch's paintings as offering models of behavior (positive and negative). H. Perry Chapman, "Women in Vermeer's Home: Mimesis and ideation," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek (NKJ) / Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art* 51 (2000), 237; Ann Sutherland Harris, *Seventeenth-Century Art and Architecture* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2005), 362–4.

5 Negative stereotypes of maidservants and the working classes more generally were conveyed through the comedic portrayals of peasants and servants in moralizing genre scenes since the early sixteenth century. Frans Verbeeck's *The Mocking of Human Follies*, for example, offers instruction on moral behavior through a scene of everyday peasant life. While the title suggests these follies as generally human, the actions are performed by working-class peasants, associating so-called "folly" or sin with their poverty and class status. In the seventeenth century, moralizing satires of the working-class shifted from mocking rural peasants to deriding maidservants. For example, Jan Steen's *Dissolute Household* centralizes the maidservant figure as enabling and encouraging her employers to misbehave, pouring wine for the wife while illicitly entangled with the husband. The chaotic disarray of the scene suggests that the servant shirks her duty to maintain the household's cleanliness and organization by tempting her employers to sin. For more information on these stereotypes, see Mariët Westermann, *A Worldly Art: The Dutch Republic, 1585-1718* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1996).

of his contemporaries such as Pieter de Hooch in recent years, scholarship on Netscher has remained focused on his portraiture or otherwise on the later parts of his career.⁶ Scholarship that does mention Netscher and the *Lacemaker* are often scant commentary rather than thorough analyses of the nuance of the work that is conducive to themes of ideal feminine domestic behavior. For example, Marjorie Wieseman devoted a single paragraph to the *Lacemaker* in her catalogue raisonnée of Netscher from 2002, acknowledging its “deceptive simplicity” while primarily discussing its similarities with Vermeer’s *Milkmaid*.⁷ Stephen Duffy and Jo Hedley provided a more thorough visual analysis of the *Lacemaker* on behalf of the Wallace Collection, the current owners of Netscher’s painting. While they identified all the visual elements of the painting, they contextualized these details solely in relation to ideals of feminine domesticity.⁸ Wayne E. Franits has completed the most extensive analysis of the *Lacemaker*, utilizing thorough iconographic analysis to connect each visual detail to themes of feminine domesticity and virtuousness.⁹ Whether discussing the *Lacemaker* at length or in passing, previous scholarship conceded Netscher represented a simplistic vision of an ideal housewife. However, I suggest a different interpretation of the *Lacemaker* through sociohistorical context related to class relations, fashion history, and the activity of lacemaking.

Understanding the distinctions between housewives and maidservants in Dutch culture during this period is crucial to accurately contextualizing Netscher’s *Lacemaker*. In the Dutch Republic, the role of a housewife originated in the middle-class household, constructed around the expectation

that women stayed in the domestic sphere and maintained the home.¹⁰ This ideal was structured by domestic treatises aimed at middle-class women such as Cats’s *Houwelyck*, which prescribed a housewife as responsible for the maintenance of the household, including tending children and supervising servants.¹¹ Even though this idealized vision was not attainable for all members of Dutch society such as immigrants and the working-class, Cats’s ideal was widely disseminated through frequent reprinting of his treatise and their transformation into genre imagery.¹² For example, Pieter de Hooch’s *Interior with Two Women Beside a Linen Closet* (Figure 2) visualizes the housewife’s domestic management abilities through a multigenerational scene. The older woman on the left passes linens to her adult daughter near the center of the painting, illustrating the dissemination of knowledge of both the ideals of feminine domestic virtue and the skills to maintain this expectation and the domestic space. The young girl playing on the right witnesses this exchange and is introduced to the duties of which she will be expected when she reaches marrying age. In addition to genre paintings like de Hooch’s, contemporary domestic manuals and moral treatises reinforced these gendered expectations of feminine domesticity, citing housewifery as the only suitable role for women in Dutch society.¹³

Genre paintings of the period typically constructed an elevated status and leisurely lifestyle for middle-class housewives.¹⁴ This situation was emphasized in some cases by the presence of working-class maidservants, whom the housewife ostensibly supervised. In works such as Gabriel

6 For example, Marjorie Wieseman’s pivotal catalogue raisonnée of Netscher builds on the author’s PhD dissertation that purposely focuses on the artist’s developments as a portraitist. Marjorie Wieseman, *Caspar Netscher and Late Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting* (Ghent: Davaco Publishers, 2002); Marjorie Wieseman, “Caspar Netscher and Late Seventeenth Century Dutch Painting,” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Columbia University, 1991). More recent articles by Wieseman and Ariane van Suchtelen reflect a similar trend to focus on the artist’s portraiture in the same issue of *Oud Holland*. See: Marjorie Wieseman, “The Craeyvanger Portraits in Context – Shedding Light on Caspar Netscher’s Early Career,” *Oud-Holland* 127: 1 (2014): 31–47; Ariane van Suchtelen, “Introduction: Ten Arnhem Family Portraits and the Collaboration Between Gerard Ter Borch and Caspar Netscher / Introductie: Tien Arnhemse Familieportretten En de Samenwerking van Gerard Ter Borch En Caspar Netscher,” *Oud-Holland* 127:1 (2014): 1–6.

7 Wieseman, *Caspar Netscher*, 57.

8 Stephen Duffy and Jo Hedley, *The Wallace Collection’s Pictures: A Complete Catalogue* (London: Unicorn Press, 2011), 300.

9 Franits has actually discussed the *Lacemaker* twice. He first addressed the work in his study of ideal feminine domesticity, *Paragons of Virtue*. He later revisited the painting in even more detail in his larger text on Dutch seventeenth-century stylistic evolution a decade later. Wayne E. Franits *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 1; Wayne E. Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting*, 108–9.

10 Martha Moffitt Peacock’s recent study traced the compelling evolution of the Dutch housewife in visual media from a domineering bully in early farcical prints to a symbol of feminine virtue and ideal domestic behavior by midcentury. While this could seem to relay a growing celebration of domestic labor, Helga Möbius acutely pointed out how this ideal increasingly confined women to solely exist in the private/domestic sphere. Martha Moffitt Peacock, *Heroines, Harpies and Housewives: Imaging Women of Consequence in the Dutch Golden Age* (Boston: Brill, 2020), 7; Helga Möbius, *Woman of the Baroque Age*, trans. by Barbara Chrusick Beedham (Montclair, NJ: Abner Schram Ltd., 1982), 31–32.

11 Jacob Cats, *Houwelyck. Dat is de gansche gelegentheydt des echten staets* (Middelburg: Jan Pietersz van de Venne, 1625) and Petrus Wittewrongel, *Œconomia Christiana, ofte Christelicke Huys-houdinge: Bestiert Naer den Reghel van het suyvere Woordt Gods* (Amsterdam: Brandt, 1655), referenced in H. Perry Chapman, “Inside Vermeer’s Women,” in *Vermeer’s Women: Secrets and Silence*, ed. Marjorie E. Wieseman (New Haven and London: Fitzwilliam Museum with Yale University Press, 2011), 66.

12 Wayne Franits and Susanna Shaw Romney allude to the legacy of Cats’s manual *Houwelyck* in their respective essays, acknowledging that while it was first printed in 1625, numerous reprintings extended the influence of Cats’s pamphlet throughout the seventeenth century. Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting*, 108; Susanah Shaw Romney, “With and alongside his housewife’: Claiming Ground in New Netherland and Early Modern Dutch Empire,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 73: 2 (April 2016): 192.

13 Cats, *Houwelyck* and Wittewrongel, *Œconomia Christiana*, referenced in Chapman, “Inside Vermeer’s Women,” 66; Romney, “With and alongside his housewife,” 192.

14 Though previously believed to document everyday life in the Dutch Republic, scholars today agree that Dutch genre paintings construct an ideal vision of domestic life during this period rather than documenting exact reality. See H. Perry Chapman, “Inside Vermeer’s Women,” and Peacock, *Heroines, Harpies, and Housewives* for a gendered analysis of this phenomenon.

Metsu's *A Woman Reading a Letter* (Figure 3), the artist contrasts the two figures to connote their different statuses through their apparel and their compositional placement. The peach satin dress, fur-trimmed overcoat or *jack*, and the *nachtaldouck* kerchief covering the hair of the woman on the left convey that she is the mistress of this household, a housewife.¹⁵ The woman on the right is distinguished as a servant. Her clothes are dark and practical. Her cropped skirt, blue apron, and fitted jacket allow for easy movement, while her hair is tucked away under a cap and out of her eyes. Furthermore, the housewife sits on a raised platform, placed physically above the woman on the right, thereby creating a visual hierarchy that prioritizes the housewife. Her shoe is discarded as she relaxes to read her letter, while the woman on the right stands on the tile floor. Metsu depicted a visual and a social hierarchy, in which the middle-class status of the housewife on the left has the literal and figurative higher ground over the working-class servant.

While Metsu and De Hooch utilized multifigural narratives to clarify the class status and role of their figures, the figure in Netscher's *Lacemaker* lacks a companion and thus presents an ambiguous vision of domestic virtue. It raises questions of who is the figure that exhibits the Dutch ideal of feminine domestic virtue, and from whom would she have learned this behavior.

Metsu's housewife and servant visualize Cats's prescription for housewives to constantly supervise their servants to ensure industrious behavior.¹⁶ The solitude of Netscher's figure suggests that her modesty and diligent attention to her lacemaking reflects more on her personal virtue rather than on the education received from a figure like de Hooch's mother or Metsu's housewife.

Netscher utilized the figure's activity, lacemaking, to further signify her industrious nature, emphasizing its importance by centralizing the pillow on which she makes lace, called a *naaikussen* in Dutch.¹⁷ The figure's gaze is focused fully on her lacemaking, her body angled away from the viewer and the picture plane. These details draw the eye to the figure's lacemaking, an activity that was gendered feminine but had different connotations depending on a woman's class status.

In the Dutch Republic, making lace was an activity taught exclusively to girls. Girls of all class backgrounds received instruction in needlework and lacemaking.¹⁸ They learned these skills in orphanages, church schools, or with

15 For more on some of the fashions in Dutch genre painting from this time period, see Bianca du Mortier, "Costumes in Gabriel Metsu's Paintings: Modes and Manners in the Mid-Seventeenth Century," in *Gabriel Metsu*, ed. Adriaan Waiboer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 127–154.

16 Marieke de Winkel, "Ambition and Apparel," in *Class Distinctions: Dutch Painting in the Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer*, edited by Ronni Baer, translated by Diane Webb (Boston: MFA Publications, 2015), 69–70.

17 Du Mortier, "Costumes in Gabriel Metsu's Paintings," 147–9.

18 Patricia Wardle, "Needle and Bobbin Lace in Seventeenth Century Holland," *The Bulletin of the Needle and Bobbin Club* 66:1/2 (1983): 3–7.

private tutors or governesses.¹⁹ Lacemaking was taught as a domestic necessity as well as a trade.²⁰ In this way, making and selling lace was a means of income available solely to women. Lacemaking also carried moral connotations as a productive pastime for women to avoid idleness, symbolic of ideal feminine domesticity and virtue.²¹ The relationship between lacemaking, productivity, and domestic propriety is reinforced by the woodcut for the cover page of an instructional pattern book for bobbin lacemaking called *Nûw Modelbuch, Allerley Gattungen Dântelschnür* (*New Pattern Book of All Kinds of Bobbin Laces*), published in Zurich in 1560 (Figure 4).²² In the woodcut, two women make lace on their *naaikussen*, and their attention is focused fully on their lacemaking. They sit in front of two large windows within a plain domestic interior. The woodcut's use as the cover for an instructional manual could suggest that the image is educational in nature. Even if this woodcut was not specifically intended to be morally didactic, the scene reinforces the ideal of feminine industry and propriety as situated within and related to domestic life.

In addition to the gendered connotations of lacemaking, this activity and its purpose depended on a woman's class. While an upper-class woman made lace for leisure, a middle-class woman made lace to decorate her home. A working-class woman might make lace to sell, supplementing her family income or saving towards her own dowry.²³

Even though lacemakers were a relatively common visual trope in the seventeenth century, Netscher's *Lacemaker* and the figure's apparent class status stand in contrast when compared to other depictions of women making lace by the artist's contemporaries. In Nicolaes Maes's *Lacemaker* (Figure 5), the figure sits slightly off-center, the tenebristic lighting effect drawing attention to the seated woman. She leans forward over her lacemaking, situated atop books on

19 Maarten Prak added that girls in orphanages were not allowed to work outside the institution; within the orphanage, they learned skills that would be useful for managing a household. Maarten Prak, *The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century*, translated by Diane Webb. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 38. For sources relating sewing, spinning and lacemaking together with moral virtue, see Ariane Van Suchtelen, "Genre - Picturing Everyday Life," in *Nicolaes Maes: Dutch Master of the Golden Age*, edited by Ariane van Suchtelen with Bart Cornelis, Marijn Schapelhoutman, and Nina Cahill (New Haven and London: National Gallery Company and Maurithuis, distributed by Yale University Press, 2019), 55, and Wayne E. Franits, *Paragons of Virtue: Women and Domesticity in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art*, 22–25.

20 James M. Andersen, *Daily Life During the Reformation* (Oxford: Greenwood, imprint of ABC-CLIO, 2011), 109. Even as genre paintings highlighted women's presence and domestic toil, Helga Möbius added that the perception of women's place in the home as "natural," supported in contemporary writing on theology, philosophy, and nature, was reinforced by an education system that only taught girls skills related to the domestic sphere. Möbius rightly articulated that this created a cycle that increasingly excluded women from public life. Möbius, *Woman of the Baroque Age*, 31–32.

21 Chapman, "Inside Vermeer's Women," 91–92; Franits, *Paragons of Virtue*, 19.

22 R.M., *Nûw Modelbuch von allerley gattungen Dântelschnür* (*New Pattern Book of All Kinds of Bobbin Laces*), translated by Helen Hough with Brad Gelliford (Zurich: Christoph Froschauer, 1561; Arlington, TX: James G. Collins & Associates, 2018).

23 Jonathan Janson with Adelheid Rech, "Lace Making in the Time of Vermeer," *Essential Vermeer*, <http://www.essentialvermeer.com/lace/lace.html>.

a wooden table. Along with the keys and the pouch in the background, the table connotes a commercial environment of a small business or shopfront, as suggested by Albert Blankert and Louis P. Grijp.²⁴ Whether she is the daughter, wife, or hired servant for the male owner, the setting contextualizes the figure as working-class, her lacemaking indicating the woman's industriousness and modesty.

In Johannes Vermeer's *Lacemaker* (Figure 6), the artist draws attention to the figure through her close proximity to the picture plane. The young woman has carefully-coiffed hair, wearing a bright yellow bodice or dress with a white collar or chemise. Rather than the typical pillow, the figure sits at a contraption designed specifically for lacemaking. Though the setting is more limited than Maes or Netscher's view, the luxurious carpet and pillow to the left and the figure's appearance designate her upper-class status, making lace as a sign of her ladylike education.²⁵

In these two paintings, Maes and Vermeer use the details in the figure's setting and appearance to clarify her identity and the painting's narrative, representing the different classes and reasons that women made lace in the Dutch Republic. Netscher's *Lacemaker* lacks such clarity in the visual details, so how can her lacemaking be understood? Contemporary moralists such as Jacob Cats connected lacemaking to maidenhood, suggesting that Netscher's *Lacemaker* is not a housewife, but an unmarried woman, and destabilizing prior scholarly interpretations of this painting.

Cats's domestic treatise for housewives, *Houwelyck*, described lacemaking as the task of a young maiden preparing for marriage.²⁶ In the first chapter, "Maeght" (Maiden), Cats advised young women to learn lacemaking for its associations with diligence and modesty, the skill both essential in the domestic sphere and symbolic of feminine virtue.²⁷ The engraving for the frontispiece of the treatise (Figure 7) exemplifies young maidens as learners. In the lower left corner, two ladies sit beside each other, with *naaikussen* for lacemaking on their laps. The younger woman on the right turns to the older woman on the left, perhaps her mother, apparently speaking and pointing towards an older man and woman walking with linked arms, gestures that link the lacemaking of maidenhood to a presumed future marriage. The marital theme is reinforced by the motif at the top of the engraving, in which two doves sit on top of two clasping hands in a roundel held by two putti. Art historian Wayne E. Franits connected this motif to *dextrarum iunctio*, the clasped hand gesture dating back to Roman times and also associated with seventeenth-century marriage ceremonies, thus a symbol of

love and unity.²⁸ Additionally, the placement of the two figures at the bottom left corner of the composition gives the young woman the ideal vantage point to observe the other figures, older women after whom she should model her actions to behave as a proper sweetheart, bride, mother and widow. These stages parallel the organization of Cats's manual, situated in a clockwise design in this engraving.

Lacemaking is further associated with maidenhood in a 1581 engraving by Adriaen Collaert after Maarten de Vos. From the series "The Seven Planets and Ages of Men," the print of *Venus* (Figure 8) shows an allegory of Venus hovering on a cloud above a multi-figural scene below. Two female figures sit on the lower right side of the composition. The woman on the left, larger in scale to suggest adulthood and motherhood compared to the smaller-scale figure of a girl to the right, is shown weaving, her eyes cast down at her loom. The girl holds a *naaikussen* on her lap, several bobbins of thread hanging towards the viewer. Making lace beside her weaving mother (identified as "Diligentia" by the inscription below the figure), the young girl is instructed in moral, industrious behavior such as lacemaking that will prepare her for when she is older, in her later role as a wife and mother. In the background, a man and woman appear to be courting, shown clasping hands similar to the roundel motif from the frontispiece of *Houwelyck*. With Venus and Cupid in the clouds above and figures playing lutes in the middle ground, the girl's lacemaking is clearly linked to love and preparations for marriage.

Both the frontispiece from *Houwelyck* and the earlier engraving of *Venus* visualize a clear connection between lacemaking and maidenhood, demanding reconsideration of past scholarly interpretations of Netscher's *Lacemaker* as a maiden rather than a housewife. For example, Stephen Duffy and Jo Hedley interpreted the figure's elegant bodice paired with a woolen skirt as connoting the housewife's lack of vanity.²⁹ However, through carefully analyzing the visual details of this painting, I reached a more convincing conclusion: that Netscher's *Lacemaker* represents a working-class maidservant and a German migrant.

Netscher's sartorial choices are one means by which the artist conveyed the figure's status. For example, the figure wears a bright red bodice with gold trim along the neckline and shoulders, pleating on the sleeves, and a white chemise underneath (Figure 9). The garment looks expensive, although it does not appear to fit the figure properly. Costume historian Joan Nunn demonstrated that garments that covered a woman's upper body at this time were tightly fitted to the body, as exemplified in a print by Caspar Netscher from the same year of a woman sewing (Figure 10).³⁰ In contrast, the top along the bust protrudes from the lacemaker's chest rather

24 Albert Blankert and Louis P. Grijp, "An Adjustable Leg and Book: Lacemakers by Vermeer and Others, and Bredero's Groot Lied-boeck in One by Dou," in *Shop Talk: Studies in Honor of Seymour Slive Presented on his Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Cynthia P. Schneider, William W. Robinson, and Alice I. Davies (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995), 41.

25 Blankert and Grijp, "An Adjustable Leg and Book," 40.

26 Chapman, "Inside Vermeer's Women," 91.

27 Chapman, "Inside Vermeer's Women," 91.

28 Wayne E. Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century Genre Painting*, 108. Also mentioned in Mariët Westermann, *A Worldly Art: The Dutch Republic, 1585-1718* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1996), 125.

29 Duffy and Hedley, *The Wallace Collection's Pictures*, 300.

30 Joan Nunn, *Fashion in Costume 1200-2000*, second edition (Chicago, IL: New Amsterdam Books, 2000), 53.

than sitting flat across her collarbone in Netscher's *Lacemaker*. The gold trim where the bodice meets the sleeve does not appear to fall where the woman's shoulder would naturally be, as if the garment is too large for her.

Netscher's choices for the *Lacemaker's* bodice invokes a common practice in the Dutch Republic in which employers gave cast-off clothes to their female employees rather than a livery, as male servants received.³¹ The apparel was outdated but still wearable, typical in style and quality for a middle-class housewife. The practice of compensating a servant with garments complicated the identification of figures as maidservants in genre works, as Diane Wolfthal effectively argued.³² The ill fit of the woman's bodice appears to portray a maid who has received a cast-off bodice from her mistress, and must make do with the clothes she has, in order to appear respectable and thus positively represent her employer's home.³³

In contrast to the red bodice, the figure's green skirt appears coarse and woolen, sturdy and long-wearing rather than new and fashionable (Figure 11). The green skirt connotes Netscher's lacemaker as a German migrant. According to art historian Marieke de Winkel, green was not a common color for clothing within the Dutch Republic. A thick green skirt like this was typically associated with German migrants, called a duffle skirt based on the thick wool it was made from (although the material's name stems from the town from which it originated, Duffel near Antwerp in present-day Belgium).³⁴ De Winkel admitted it is unclear if green was worn in reality or merely metaphoric of the migrants' inexperience upon arriving in the Dutch Republic. However, this association was commonly employed for German migrant characters in contemporary Dutch farces, in which the green duffle skirt was mocked or otherwise a marker of the German character's humiliation.³⁵ The bias against German migrants is further exemplified in the differing reaction to regional dress for Dutch country girls compared to Germans. While Dutch girls from areas like Waterland with specific regional dress were admired, German migrants who retained their regional apparel were disparaged.³⁶ Given that most German migrants to the Dutch Republic were working-class laborers and servants, this prejudice might have been rooted in both classism and anti-immigrant, anti-German sentiments.³⁷

31 Diane Wolfthal, "Household Help: Early Modern Portraits of Female Servants," *Early Modern Women* 8 (Fall 2013): 13.

32 Wolfthal, "Household Help," 13.

33 Diane Wolfthal, "Foregrounding the Background: Images of Dutch and Flemish Household Servants," in *Women and Gender in the Early Modern Low Countries, 1500-1750*, edited by Sarah Joan Moran and Amada Pipkin (Boston: Brill, 2019), 235.

34 Marieke de Winkel, "Ambition and Apparel," in *Class Distinctions: Dutch Painting in the Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer*, edited by Ronni Baer, translated by Diane Webb (Boston: MFA Publications, 2015), 65.

35 De Winkel, "Ambition and Apparel," 66.

36 De Winkel, "Ambition and Apparel," 65.

37 Du Mortier, 127; Ronni Baer, *Class Distinctions: Dutch Painting in the Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer*, translated by Diane Webb (Boston: MFA Publications, 2015), 210.

The figure's decorative coif reflects the figure's liminal societal position, both as a maidservant in a middle-class home and as a German migrant living in the Dutch Republic. The coif is elaborately embroidered, an expensive item above the income of a maidservant. However, this style of coif dates to the early seventeenth century (Figure 12), suggesting it represents another hand-me-down from the maid's employer. Additionally, the coif's intricate design shows a pair of clasping hands in a circle, surrounded by vine and floral imagery and a bird on top (Figure 13). Franits related this motif to the clasped hand gesture associated with contemporary marriage ceremonies as well as a symbol of love and unity. Franits also aligned the motif with a similar detail from the frontispiece of Jacob Cats's treatise (Figure 14).³⁸ Given my previous connection between the figure's lacemaking and unmarried status, Netscher's *Lacemaker* perhaps represents a maiden imagining her future nuptials. Additionally, since working-class women including maidservants could make and sell lace, that income could go towards her own dowry. In this way, Netscher's figure actively works towards her own future, as a married woman and an immigrant who aspired to be fully integrated into Dutch society.

While the lacemaker sits tall and appears relaxed in the sparse setting, the ill-fitted bodice and intricate coif—both inherited from her employer—paired with her green skirt suggest a disconnect between the clothing she wears, the space she occupies, and by extension, her status in the liminal space between the Netherlands and Germany. Her apparel and her surroundings reflect this discomfort, displaying a mixture of items with Dutch and German attributes. The mussel shells on the right are particularly Dutch, characteristic of the coastal provinces compared to the German territories.³⁹ The print on the wall shows a landscape, a rapidly growing genre within the Dutch Republic and signed by the artist below.⁴⁰ However, the print presents a forest landscape that is more typical of Germany than the Dutch countryside. In addition, its creased state suggests that the print was folded and held for a long time, perhaps another object inherited from the figure's employers. The print's creased state mirrors the wear and tear on the figure's discarded shoes on the left, as if they have come a long way, just like the figure herself as an immigrant. The broom in the corner could relate to her role as a

38 Franits, *Dutch Seventeenth-Century Art*, 109.

39 Price, "Water and Land," 36.

40 The development of landscape painting in the Netherlands is discussed by Michael North, for example. See Michael North, *Art and Commerce in the Dutch Golden Age*, translated by Catherine Hill (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 99, 111, 114.

maidservant, responsible for the cleanliness of the household, as well as reflecting the Dutch ideals of feminine domestic virtue, defined by industriousness and modesty.⁴¹

The multi-faceted meanings of these visual details relay the revolutionary nature of Netscher's *Lacemaker*. In her mixture of Dutch and German clothing, surrounded by items that evoke both cultures, the figure represents a woman working hard and apparently choosing to assimilate into a society that seeks to reject her. While maidservants and German migrants were perceived negatively in urban Dutch society, Caspar Netscher portrayed the figure with dignity, worthy of praise rather than scorn. With the *Lacemaker*, Netscher appears to reinforce patriarchal ideals of feminine domesticity on the surface, while the carefully-selected details undermine stereotypes of maidservants and German migrants as well as who is typically perceived as worthy and able to exhibit moral Christian behavior in seventeenth-century Dutch society.

However, this sympathetic view was apparently unpopular in The Hague where Netscher spent the majority of his career. Following 1662 and his painting of the *Lacemaker*, Netscher portrayed increasingly elegant ladies such as the figure shown on the right, before turning exclusively to the highly-profitable market of portraiture.⁴² Works like *Woman at her Toilette* (Figure 15) reinforced the aspirational desires of Netscher's primarily middle- and upper-class clientele in The Hague, placing the modest, moralizing *Lacemaker* out of fashion. Despite its lack of traction on the art market, Netscher selected this woman, a working-class German immigrant, as worthy of respect, captured in oil as an embodiment of Dutch social values.

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41 The most popular source for iconographic interpretations of motifs in Dutch genre paintings and their relation to morality and sin is Simon Schama's *Embarrassment of Riches*. See Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 375–464.

42 Marjorie E. Wieseman, *Caspar Netscher and Late Seventeenth-Century Dutch Painting* (Ghent, Belgium: Davaco Publishers, 2002), 25.

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Figure 1. Caspar Netscher, *Lacemaker* (1662) oil on canvas, 33 x 27 cm, Inv. No. P237, The Wallace Collection, London.



Figure 2. Pieter de Hooch, *Interior with Two Women Beside a Linen Closet* (1663) oil on canvas, 72 x 77.5 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Figure 3. Gabriel Metsu, *A Woman Reading a Letter* (c. 1664-66) oil on wood panel, 52.5 x 40.2 cm, Beit Collection, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin.

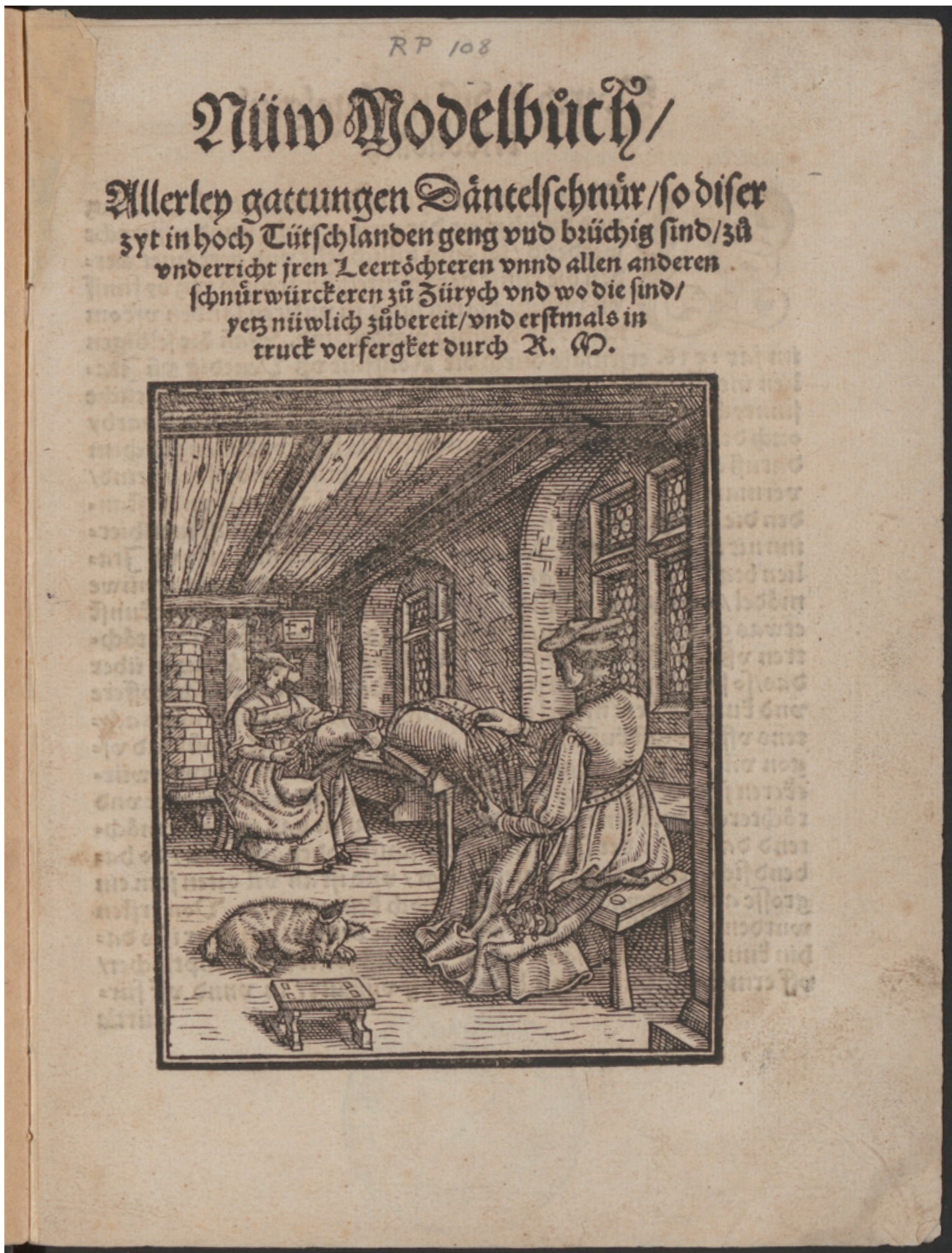


Figure 4. R.M., Cover page for *Nûw Modelbuch, Allerley Gattungen Dântelschnür* (New Pattern Book (1561) of All Kinds of Bobbin Laces) (printed by Christoph Froschauer, Zurich, 1561), woodcut, Inv. No. VD 16 N 1319, Vischer C 594, Zentralbibliothek Zürich.



Figure 5. Nicolaes Maes, Lacemaker (1655) oil on oak panel, 57.1 x 43.8 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

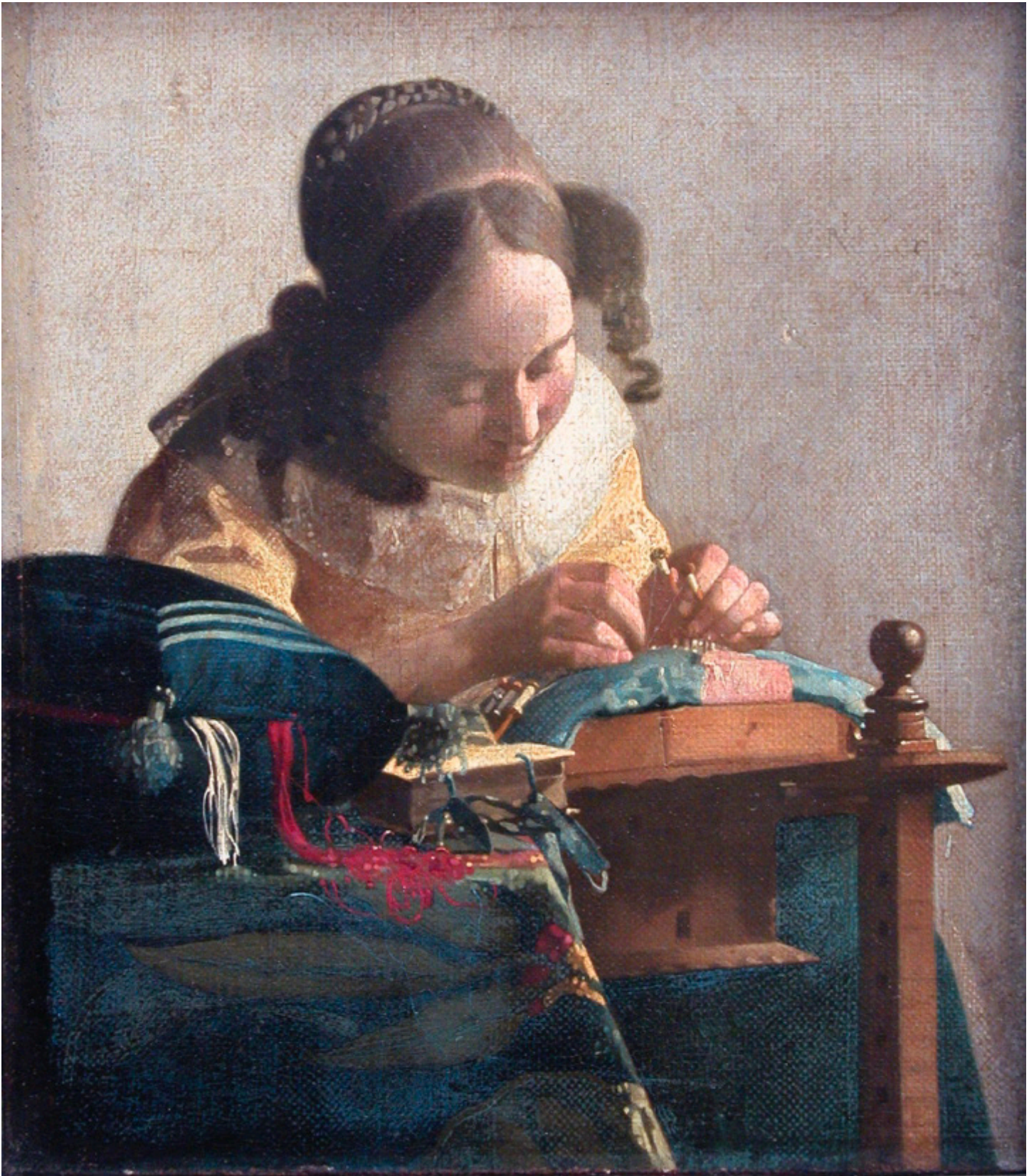


Figure 6. Johannes Vermeer, *The Lacemaker (La Dentillière)* (1669-70) oil on canvas, 24.5 x 21 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris.



Figure 7. Pieter de Jode after Adriaen Pietersz van de Venne, Frontispiece from Jacob Cats's *Houwelyck*. *Dat is de gansche gelegentheyde des echten staets* (published originally in Middelburg 1625-6, possibly by "weduwe Jan Pietersz. van de Venne") engraving, Inv. No. RP-P-1929-86, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Figure 8. Adriaen Collaert after Maarten de Vos, *Venus* from the “Seven Planets and Ages of Men” series (1581) engraving, De Young and Legion of Honor Museums of Fine Arts, San Francisco.



Figure 10. Albert Henry Payne after Caspar Netscher, *A Woman Sewing* (orig. 1662, 19th century copy) engraving, Netherlands Institute for Art History, The Hague, the Netherlands.



Figure 9. Caspar Netscher, *Lacemaker* (detail) (1662) oil on canvas, 33 x 27 cm, Inv. No. P237, The Wallace Collection, London.



Figure 11. Caspar Netscher, *Lacemaker* (detail) (1662) oil on canvas, 33 x 27 cm, Inv. No. P237, The Wallace Collection, London.



Figure 12. Unknown (Great Britain), Coif (c. 1570-99) black silk and silver-gilt thread on linen, 41 x 22 cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Figure 13. Caspar Netscher, *Lacemaker* (detail) (1662) oil on canvas, 33 x 27 cm, Inv. No. P237, The Wallace Collection, London.



Figure 14. Pieter de Jode after Adriaen Pietersz van de Venne, Frontispiece from Jacob Cats's *Houwelyck*. *Dat is de gansche gelegentheyt des echten staets* (detail) (published originally in Middelburg 1625-6, possibly by "weduwe Jan Pietersz. van de Venne") engraving, Inv. No. RP-P-1929-86, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.



Figure 15. Netscher, *Woman at Her Toilette* (c. 1665) oil on panel, 42.5 x 33 cm, Private collection of Johnny and Sarah van Haefen, London.

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