

Exhibition proposal - “Luminous”

By Amanda Buschmann



Title: Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber
Artist: Sánchez Cotán
Location: San Diego Museum of Art
Created: 1602
Medium: Oil paint
Dimensions: 290cm x 239cm



Title: Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window
Artist: Johannes Vermeer
Location: Old Masters Picture Gallery
Created: 1657–1659
Medium: Oil paint
Dimensions: 83cm × 64.5cm



Title: Mother lacing her bodice beside cradle
Artist: Pieter de Hooch
Location: Staatliche Museum, Berlin
Created: 1661-1663
Medium: Oil paint
Dimensions: 92cm x 100cm

Art from the 16th century was heavily shaped by Baroque influence, an artistic current that originated in Italy in the early 1600s and spread to most of Europe until the 17th century. Some of the well known artists from this period are Johannes Vermeer, Sanchez Cotan and Pieter Hendricksz de Hooch; the paintings taken into consideration represent different subjects and scenarios, however they reflect the current’s formal characteristics and ideals, offering a

particular attention and focus on the use of light. The artists use it in order to create and define atmosphere in their work as well as highlighting the action being carried out by the subject.

During the Baroque period, which followed the Renaissance, Humans and their daily activities acquired more significance, virtue was found in individualism and there was a decreasing concern regarding the future. Therefore life and the present were to be cherished and recognized, often through visual representations. Johannes Vermeer was born in 1632. He was a Dutch innkeeper, art dealer and painter who created a small number of pieces that were mainly commissions for a restricted group of patrons in Delft, where the artist was born and lived for most of his life.¹

Most of Vermeer's work portrays women in their homes carrying out daily activities such as playing an instrument or writing; the still images evoke an aura of mystery and quiet, which appears to be frozen in time just like the subject and the paintings themselves. Another recurrent element is a soft light which enters from the window on the left of the rooms he depicts. The light varies in its intensity, creating a balance between the different aspects of each composition, hugging the figures and illuminating them in order to illustrate them in a carefully weighted atmosphere. In the painting "Girl Reading a Letter at an Open Window" a young woman stands in front of the window, alone, reading a letter. The setting may initially appear static, due to the fact that these paintings were staged, Vermeer's way of weaving a narrative was therefore idealistic rather than natural. However the visible reflection of the girl's face in the window's glass, suggests a deeper and more significant type of movement which refers to an action involving both her body and soul, thinking. The reflection only exists because of the artist's use

¹ Metmuseum.org. (2019)

of light, as the girl reads the letter, the viewer is able to imagine how the girl is stimulated by the words as feelings and memories start to arise in her.

The artist's use of color instead affects the atmosphere, the presence of different tonalities of red, brown and yellow creates a feeling of warmth. However his choice of green and blue tones, also used in his white brush strokes, stimulate a feeling of coldness. This element creates harmony in the way the painting looks but it leads to conflicting feelings in terms of the way it is perceived by the viewer, who may or may not feel partially detached from the scenario, given the great contrast in hues.

His brush strokes are careful and precise with an extreme attention to defining details such as the pattern of the rug, the fruit in the bowl and the folds in the curtain on the left. Vermeer's mark making also contributes to the successful use of chiaroscuro, which functions as an interplay between dim light and darkness, making the atmosphere dramatic.² The artist's use of light is one of the most emblematic elements of his technique and style. It creates a guide for the public's experience of viewing his work and puts emphasis on everyday settings which become both delicate and intriguing. It also to an extent forms an imaginary pedestal, for the subject but most of all, for the action that is being carried out.

Pieter Hendricksz de Hooch painted "Mother lacing her bodice beside cradle" with very similar parameters. He was also a Dutch artist, his work became very popular between 1655 and 1662 and most of his paintings were commissioned in Amsterdam and Delft. The artist depicted many interiors or courtyards with small groups of people, occupied in domestic daily activities and his style resembles Vermeer's, which Scholars believe de Hooch was in contact with. The

² Encyclopedia Britannica (2019).

habit and choice of depicting rooms, which often had windows, suggest to the viewer that it was a way for the Baroque artists of fabricating a frame in which the subjects represented, and background or meaning, associated with them, could exist.

The painting selected for this exhibition features a particularly calm and spacious environment, which is created by the artist's manipulation of light, followed by the use of color and attention to complex perspective. The mother's figure is highlighted by the light pouring in from the window on the upper right corner of the room, allowing the viewer to observe the details. There is an intentional focus on the woman's bodice and her hands, which hold the laces while she also tends towards the cradle, she had no one to assist her. The painting's title and this aspect of the work suggest that the action portrayed is an important subject of the representation, it conveys a feeling of humility, representing the social context and status the subjects are part of.

³ However, the viewer's attention is also directed towards the little girl, portrayed standing still, looking outside, in the shadow of a semi-opened door. Her face is completely hidden from the public as the painter only allows the viewer to see the girl's back, this element makes the subject mysterious and stimulates curiosity. The use of light mirrors Vermeer's but it is also in a way, reversed, as the little girl's image isn't directly lit up by the door. De Hooch purposely uses perspective to position her in the soft darkness, which fills the rest of the room, producing an atmosphere that is delicate but also highly enigmatic and inscrutable.

Juan Sanchez Cotan's painting "Quince, Cabbage, Melon, and Cucumber" has also often been defined as inscrutable and mysterious, not like the other works explored, this still life shows a quince and a fresh cabbage hanging from a thread while the melon, partially cut into, and the

³ Wieseman, M. and Vermeer, J. (2011).

cucumber lay on a dark colored surface. Throughout his life he was heavily influenced by Catholic mysticism that was present in Toledo at the time which brought him to ultimately become a Carthusian lay brother, in a Segovian monastery where he died in 1612.⁴

The “Quince, Cabbage, Melon, and Cucumber” painting features a specific use of light as well as attention to the use of volume and depth. Like both Vermeer and de Hooch, Cotan’s perspective technique allows the public to view detailed realism. The latter is a kind of realism that is different from the decorative and exuberant Dutch still lifes which were being created at the time, depicting trumpeting flowers and colors⁵ (Independent). Unlike the latter and the other works taken into consideration, the artist uses suspension and composition in order to create a scenario and consequently an associated atmosphere. Although people are mostly aware that hanging fruits and vegetables helps arresting decay, the disposition and sequence of objects themselves appear rather curious and peculiar and the viewer is stimulated to wonder about it. The same doubts exist for Cotan’s choice in terms of the surface chosen, on which both the melon and the cucumber lay, it appears as a window or a plain table top, dominated by dark shades of green and black. His use of light originates an extremely dramatic atmosphere, it reflects the common idea of the Baroque style dim lit room but also resembles a void in terms of the foreground⁶. The high contrast between the well lit detailed objects and the foreground suggests that the painter wanted to give importance and cherish the simplicity and beauty of such still lifes, which repeatedly appear in his paintings.

⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica. (2019).

⁵ Anon, (2019).

⁶ Nga.gov. (2019).

Given that the focus of this exhibition is light and the way artists have used it through their different techniques, I will hang the works with light directed at them from different angles and in different intensities. “Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber” will be placed on the wall nearest to the entrance, this will introduce the public to the still life current and how artists such as Cotan were able to manipulate light in order to create realistic details, “Mother lacing her bodice” will be hanging, instead, inside an elevated space resembling a room, which the viewer will be able to access through a short flight of stairs. The latter alludes to the artists’ recurrent choice of setting and idea of scenario. “Girl reading a letter” will be disposed on the wall to the left of the elevated space, the viewer will also be able to observe it from an aperture in it, resembling a window, often the source of light for these paintings. The scope of the exhibition is to have the public reflect on both the use of light and setting, equally important and particular style elements of the artists explored in this proposal.

Notes:

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