

23 & 24 May 2025

Emotions in 17th Century Art

Humour

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Lecture summary

It is only very recently that scholars have attempted to explore the concept of humour in early modern Europe in an interdisciplinary way. Humour is notoriously difficult to translate across cultures, let alone centuries, and art historians are now considering 'the comic as an intellectual problem' in Dutch art.¹ David Smith points out that for a long time scholars did not take humour seriously in the cultural productions of early modern Europe, and speculates this was probably because of the difficulties in defining it. It is highly specific to individual cultures, often representing a breach or subversion of norms of behaviour. In relation to art it is further complicated by the social position occupied by viewers. Did they for example feel superior to scenes of peasants drinking in taverns? Or did they recognize themselves in the behaviour of foolish characters in paintings? However we wish to interpret them, paintings of people pulling faces, laughing, or smiling, or deceiving each other become widespread in the 1600s in the low countries, opening up avenues for emotional responses on the part of the viewer that would only be fully exploited in the following century.

Among many other ingenious comic paintings of the time we will also look at *The Eavesdropper* by Nicolaes Maes, which exists in a number of versions. Maes demonstrates the ingenuity of Dutch artists in the seventeenth-century as they experimented with new ways of storytelling. The eavesdropper looks directly out of the painting at the viewer and exhorts them to silence, inviting them into the painting to observe the secret tryst taking place in the background. By means of perspective and observation of the interior spaces of Dutch houses, Maes constructs an intriguing composition, that is both humorous and playful.

Slide list

Example

1. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Peasant Dance*, c. 1568, oil on panel, 114 x 164 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.
2. Jan Miense Molenaer, *The Five Senses: Smell*, 1637, oil on panel, 19.5 x 24.3 cm, Mauritshuis, The Hague.
3. Paulus Potter, *Peasant on a dung-hill*, oil on panel, 35.8 x 39.5 cm Staatliches Museum, Schwerin.
4. Cornelis Dusart, *Drinking Bout*, 1690, oil on canvas, 48 x 56 cm, Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem.
5. Frans Hals, *Pekelharing*, 1628-30, 75 x 65 cm, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Kassel.
6. Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn, *Rembrandt laughing*, c. 1628, oil on copper, 22.2 x 17.1 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
7. Jan van Bijlert, *Girl with a flute (detail)*, c. 1630, oil on canvas, 180 x 85.8 cm, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.
8. Frans Hals, *Laughing Boy*, 1625, oil on panel, 30.45 cm, Mauritshuis, The Hague.
9. Adriaen Brouwer, *Youth making a face*, c. 1632-1635, oil on panel, 13.7 x 10.5 cm, National Gallery of art, Washington.

¹ The quote is from David R. Smith's introduction to *Parody and Festivity in Early Modern Art: Essays on Comedy as Social vision*, (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2012) p. 1.

10. Adriaen Brouwer, *The smokers*, 1636, oil on wood, 46.4 x 36.8 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
11. Joos van Craesbeeck, *The Smoker*, c. 1635-6, oil on panel, 41 x 32 cm, Louvre Museum, Paris.
12. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio *Cardsharps*, oil on canvas, 1594-5, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth.
13. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *The Gypsy Fortune Teller*, c. 1594, oil on canvas, 99 x 131 cm, Louvre Museum, Paris.
14. Jacob Van Oost, *An interior with soliders cheating at Cards*, 1634, oil on canvas, 58 x 97.3 cm, Private Collection.
15. Caspar Netscher, *Fortune Teller*, c. 1666-70, oil on canvas, 59.5 x 51 cm, The Leiden Collection, New York.
16. Gerrit van Honthurst, *The Merry Fiddler*, 1623, oil on canvas, 107.2 x 88.3 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
17. Gerrit van Honthorst, *The Procuress*, 1625, oil on panel, 71 x 104 cm, Centraal Museum, Utrecht.
18. Gerrit van Honthorst, *Girl holding an obscene image*, 1625, oil on canvas, 81.3 x 64.1 cm, St Louis Museum of Art, St Louis.
19. Adriaen Hanneman, *Portrait of Cornelis van Aersson, Lord of Sommelsdijk*, 1658, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
20. Jan van Bijlert, *Girl with a flute*, c. 1630, oil on canvas, 180 x 85.8 cm, AGNSW, Sydney.
21. Frans Hals, *Young Man and Woman in an Inn*, 1623, oil on canvas, 105.4 x 79.4 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York .
22. Jan Tilius, *A Hurdy-Gurdy Player with an old woman singing and a mocking youth*, oil n panel 35.2 x 29.7 cm, 1681, Art Market.
23. Judith Leyster, *A boy and a girl with a cat and an eel*, c. 1635, oil on wood, 59.4 x 48.8 cm National Gallery, London.
24. Judith Leyster, *Two children with cat*, 1629, 61 x 52 cm, Private collection.
25. Bernhard Keil, *A girl teasing a boy*, c. 1650-1660, oil on canvas, 59 x 72 cm, Maurithaus, The Hague.
26. Gerard Ter Borch the Younger, *Woman tickling a sleeping soldier*, c. 1655, oil on canvas, 78.1 x 76.2 cm, The Leiden Collection, New York.
27. Jacob Ochtervelt, *The sleeping Cavalier*, oil on panel, 67 x 59 cm, Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester.
28. Nicolaes Maes *Old Woman in Prayer*, c. 1656, oil on canvas, 134 x 113 cm Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
29. Gabriël Metsu, *The Poultry Seller*, 1662, Oil on oak panel, 62 x 46 cm, Gemäldegalerie, Dresden.
30. Gillis Van Breen after Nicolaes Clock, *Poultry seller*, engraving, Amsterdam, Rijksprentenkabinet, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam
31. Caspar Netscher, *A woman feeding a Parrot, with a page*, 1666, oil on panel, 45.7 x 36.2 cm National Gallery of Art, Washington
32. Gerrit Dou, *Young Woman in a Niche with a Parrot and Cage*, ca. 1660-65 , oil on panel ,24.8 x 18.4 cm, Leiden Collection, New York.
33. Gabriël Metsu, *The Hunter's Present*, 51 x 48 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
34. Peter Wtewael, *Kitchen Scene*, 1620s, oil on canvas, 113.7 x 160 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
35. Jan Steen, *Self-portrait with a lute: a sense of hearing*, ca. 1664, oil on canvas, 23.8 x 19.3 cm, The Leiden Collection, New York.
36. Jan Steen, *Luxury Beware*, 1663, oil on canvas, 105 x 145.5 cm, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.
37. Jan Steen, *The Dissolute Household*, 1661-64, oil on canvas, 81 x 89 cm, Apsley House, London.
38. Jan Steen, *The Dissolute Household*, ca. 1663-64, oil on canvas, 108 x 90.2 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

39. Jan Steen, *The Lovesick Maiden*, c. 1660, oil on canvas, 86.4 x 99.1 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
40. Albrecht Dürer, *Melancholia 1*, engraving, plate 24 x 18.5 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
41. Jan Steen, *The Doctor's Visit*, c. 1660-1665, oil on panel, 46 x 36.8 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.
42. Frans van Mieris the Elder, *The Doctor's visit*, 1667, oil on panel, unframed 44.5 x 31.1 cm, Getty Museum, Los Angeles.
43. Nicolaes Maes, *Sleeping man having his pockets picked*, c. 1656, oil on panel, 35.6 x 30.4 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
44. Nicolaes Maes, *The Eavesdropper*, 1657, oil on canvas, 93 x 112 cm, Dordrechts Museum, Dordrecht.
45. Nicolaes Maes, *The Eavesdropper*, 1655-56, oil on canvas, 57.5 x 66 cm, Apsley House, Wellington Museum, London.
46. Nicolaes Maes, *The Eavesdropper*, 1655, Mansion House, Guildhall Art Gallery, City of London.
47. Nicolaes Maes, *The Listening Housewife*, 1655, oil on panel, 75 x 60 cm, Royal Collection, Windsor.
48. Pieter de Hooch, *The Bedroom*, oil on canvas, 51 x 60 cm, National Gallery of Art Washington.

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