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Illusion and Iconoclasm in Emmanuel de Witte's A Sermon in the Old Church in Delft



Fig. 1. Emmanuel de Witte, *A Sermon in the Old Church in Delft*. Oil on oak, cradled, 73.2 x 59.5 cm. The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

The celebrated imitation of nature that characterized Dutch art in the golden age of the seventeenth century produced paintings of all sorts of objects encountered in the daily course of life. Still life, boats, seascapes, and buildings were all deemed worthy of the brush, and painted in such detail that they could sometimes fool the viewer into believing that they were real. The genre of church interiors, however, brought to light another facet of the Dutch culture of the period, one that could be said to deny nature – human nature, that is. The austerities of official Calvinism included strict moral devotion free from any distraction. Churches were purged of virtually all of their icons and images, and painters were forced to exert their creative energies elsewhere. Emmanuel de Witte, known best for his paintings of the whitewashed churches of the period, was aware of the problems associated with his subjects. On the one hand, a church is an architectural work of art, and thus subject to artistic representation, but on the other hand, it is also an embodiment of an ideology that was suspicious of any creative product of the human mind (even when such products were permitted by doctrine, as with secular painting). In his *A Sermon in the Old Church in Delft* fig. 1, painted between 1650 and 1651 and displayed in the National Gallery of Canada, he uses a contrast between the whitewashed interior and the overtly painterly false frame and curtain to explore this tension, and ultimately to celebrate the making of art over our iconoclasm.¹

Many of de Witte's paintings feature people in the foreground who look at something important, and in doing so, direct our own gaze. When his pictures lack such an obvious device, there is nevertheless a clue in the actions of other figures. In a painting of the Oude Kerk in Amsterdam, the figures have gestures suggesting conversation, indicating, Angela Vanhaelen believes, a privileging of the Calvinist

religion of the Word over images.² This does not apply to our painting, because central in the foreground are de Witte's conventional gazers; in this case, a man and a dog. At first we might think to find the same concern for the Word here as well, for the pulpit and the sermonizing minister are right above the man's head, and almost as central, but both man and dog are instead looking up and to the right. In fact, they seem to show no interest in the words of the sermon, in contrast to the barely visible heads sitting in the pew. The placement of the false curtain further underlines this point. We are given led to believe that it covers up more people in the pew listening to the sermon by its cutting off half the profile of a man in the pew, while also emphasizing the inattentive people in the foreground by the lack of feet under the curtain, which in turn guarantees that everyone of interest in the foreground is visible to us.

Clearly the figures in the foreground are more relevant to the painting, which is to be expected at any rate, but the curtain, together with the roof of the pulpit, also serves to enclose the largest section of white space in the painting, over on the wall opposite to us, the viewers. It is to this space that the man and the dog seem generally to be looking. Following their gaze through the frame made by the pulpit and the curtain, the whitewashed space appears to be an important focal point for the painting. I will argue later that this perceived centrality is something of an illusion, but the viewer's eye is still naturally drawn to the space and thus we should consider its importance.

The section of wall has clearly been whitewashed as part of Calvinist iconoclasm, and de Witte makes this obvious by the texture of his paint. The area is patchy and ambiguous, as if colour which might previously have been found beneath the white layer is trying to break through. Even the window seems to have been painted over as it has the same texture and lacks even the modest colour of the other windows in the painting. This texture draws our attention to the physicality of the paint, and opens questions about the processes and ideologies involved in the act of applying the white paint – both the paint of the iconoclast and that of de Witte himself. Why is this section of interest to the man and his dog? Is it because

they are moved by the sermon after all, and they are filling the blank space with their contemplations about religious truths? After all, that was why the vaults of cathedrals like the Oude Kerk extend so high, so that the congregation might be encouraged to think of heaven. Peter Saenredam, the pioneer of church interior painting, aimed at something similar when he emphasized the strength of his churches by using the whitewashing, thereby allowing the height and space of the religious structure to manifest itself without any distraction. Also, his figures were small and somewhat peripheral to the painting as a whole and seem to be there mostly to set the scale.³

De Witte, however, obviously takes a different approach. Even in paintings where he represents more of the church, the human figures are still a crucial part of the scene, and in the present picture, they are at the forefront. If de Witte had wanted us to witness the awe inspired by a high-vaulted church, he might have made different choices in representing the space. In fact, one of the ways in which he distinguished himself from Saenredam was that he abandoned strict architectural portraiture for the sake of creatively adding size and spatial effect. In other words, he liked make his own adjustments in his representations of churches.⁴

De Witte was therefore someone who was very conscious of his artistry. He was not content to merely produce replications of buildings so that buyers could relive their uplifting experiences in the local church. Instead, he wanted to add his own artistic message and social commentary. Having such artistic ambition does not mix well with the starkly objective image of iconoclasm presented by the Calvinist churches. Vanhaelen recognizes that de Witte is conflicted as an artistic creator faced with a subject of artistic destruction, and she argues that he combines both tendencies, creating new images by depicting the destruction of images. He creates, Vanhaelen says (borrowing a phrase from Bruno Latour), an “iconoclasm.”⁵ However, I am troubled by the way Vanhaelen interprets de Witte’s act of altering his churches as a form of iconoclasm: “While [the artist’s hand] composes the representation, it also commits acts of iconoclasm and exposes the limits of representation, revealing in the process the very tenuous relations between images

and the realities that they claim to represent."⁶ It was as if the Dutch churches were not iconoclastic enough, and in sublimating them to his own imagination, de Witte renders them less threatening as iconic works of art! This is a compelling reading, but I think that *A Sermon in the Old Church in Delft* is less ambiguous in its treatment of iconoclasm: it is hostile to the art-destroying ideology. I claim that the binary between the creation and destruction of images should be maintained, and that this particular painting is opposed outright to iconoclasm. The conflict is starker than the reconcilable tension suggested by Vanhaelen.

As for the changes de Witte makes to his churches, it is true that he apparently did make some adjustments to Delft's Oude Kerk for this particular representation: he relocates the pulpit from its contemporary position against a wall to a pillar, and ignores the brickwork of the pillars.⁷ These changes might make for a smoother layout, however they do not seem particularly relevant to the overall meaning of the painting. If the changes to the Oude Kerk were meant solely to be understood in reference to the original church, they would not have been included in a painting with *trompe-l'œil* effects. A reading of the changes to the church in de Witte's representation as iconoclastic references cannot readily be sustained without explicit evidence within the painting itself. Instead, what the painting does make explicit is the noticeable contrast between the white space and the colour surrounding it. The curtain, the clothes of the family in the foreground, and the density of the decoration in the bottom left corner above the pew all complicate the whiteness with attractive colours. They compete for our attention with the white at the top of our church, and by proxy, with the Calvinist fear of imagery.

The false curtain and frame especially make the issue of painting versus iconoclasm unequivocal. Curtains of this kind were often placed over treasured paintings to protect them from light and dust, and painted imitations of the real ones were rather common in Dutch art of the period.⁸ The attention to detail in this *trompe-l'œil* shows just how whole-heartedly de Witte threw himself into this convention. The rich texture of the material, the haphazard positioning of the tassels and the curtain rings, the care to hide the tassels on the side of the fold facing

the picture, and the shadow cast by the curtain rod all speak to a careful application of observed nature. Such *trompe-l'œil* devices were intended to bring pleasure by showing an impressive use of a flat surface to create a three dimensional effect. Patrons, Vanhaelen convincingly argues, could be made to feel like connoisseurs who were wise to illusions.⁹ Moreover, in the tradition of the realism of Zeuxis and Parrhasius, the *trompe-l'œil* served to display the magic and power of painting.¹⁰ The trick's realism gives the whole painting an aura of verisimilitude, which is particularly necessary if the subject has been altered.¹¹ At the same time, by giving such realism to a false object, a painter highlights the fact that the painting is only a representation. There is no doubt in my mind that de Witte intended to relay this kind of painterly bravado with his false curtain, but I do have to disagree with the critics on how to interpret it. Vanhaelen again sees a kind of Calvinist apologia, arguing that the real curtains and their painted reproductions (though not necessarily *trompe l'oeil*) "became a means of vividly calling attention to the representational status of illusionistic works of art," thus ensuring that they are no longer a threatening icon.¹² There might be something to this argument and how it could ease the fears certain patrons might have about buying a painting, and even make them feel witty, but to understand the importance of the *trompe-l'œil* in the present painting, we have to consider its relationship to the image of the church behind it.

The false curtain surprises us, and gets us thinking. It is perhaps the first thing we notice about the painting, and we might even be tempted to move it aside to get the full view of the picture. It engages our critical faculties that then proceed to examine the picture itself. If it is obvious to the audience that a work of art is fictional or theatrical, it removes their empathy for it and encourages them to think about the meaning and ideas of the artwork.¹³ It might be argued that something similar happens with de Witte's false curtain. Even though the *trompe-l'œil* is apparently mimetic and illusory, the opposite of explicit fictionality, the effect becomes self-reflexive once the viewer recognizes the trick. We are at once reminded that we inhabit a real world outside of the painting, and at the same time

are invited to explore the world of the painting intellectually. It is as if de Witte was winking at the viewer and indicating that he was only joking, and the viewer, aware of this, comes to expect other tricks. The technique is therefore even more effective than explicit fictionality because it invites the audience to share in its artifice, rather than alienating them from it. The trick certainly distracts from the picture and breaks the church's solemnity. Moreover, by sharing the joke with the viewer, it shows how the art of painting can be immediately relevant to its audience, and even hold power over it. Such an image of the power of painting makes a mockery of the feeble iconoclastic attempt to control imagery. The flip-side of this is, of course, that iconoclasm is right to fear this power, and it is possible that de Witte is alluding to that too, but he is enjoying his painting too much to take the iconoclast's side.

The curtain and the whitewash are therefore meant to contrast with one another in both colour and meaning. The whitewashed section of the wall that holds the attention of the figures is an image of God-fearing iconoclasm, and the curtain is an example of the triumph of painting. While the white wall is given prominence by its framing and the gaze of the characters, the supremacy of the *trompe-l'œil* in the meaning of the painting exerts itself both physically and as an intangible idea. For one, the curtain contains and frames the whitewashed portion. Most simply, it does this by covering up the whitewash, so that we do not need to see more of it. But it also accomplishes this framing by showing itself master of our expectations about the whitewash. Above, I argued that we are drawn to the whitewashed section by the gaze of the man and the dog, giving the section a certain centrality in the meaning of the painting. At first glance, the whitewashed section seems to almost have a literal centrality in the overall painting, but this is actually an optical illusion created by the curtain. It covers the border between the coloured part of the image and the black false frame on the right side, creating the impression that the coloured portion is larger than it is, which would in turn mean that the section of whitewashed wall is more central in the "real" coloured part. Actually, there is an equal distance from both the left and right edges of the black false frame to the coloured areas of the picture, with the white space beginning

in the dead centre of the painting with the pulpit and the ribbed demarcation on the wall, but it extends well past the third quarter of the painting. Therefore, on the one hand, the false curtain serves to privilege the whitewash, but this grandeur is an illusion staged by the *trompe-l'œil*. Any claims that the whitewash has to the centrality of the painting are shown to exist under the true dominance of the curtain. Just as the initial victory of Zeuxis was overturned by a false curtain in his painting contest with Parrhasius, de Witte undermines the apparent supremacy of the whitewash with a trick curtain.¹⁴

The *trompe-l'œil* section also literally casts its “shadow” (from the curtain rod) over the whitewash and the rest of the picture. Interestingly, de Witte did not always include a false shadow with his false curtains, so the fact that he includes one here could be significant.¹⁵ Omitting the shadow obviously dampens the illusion and makes the trick less complete, and perhaps sets it up as an object of convention less relevant to the picture. After all, that which does not cast a shadow can not have any substance. It would still encourage critical thought of the painting by making the art explicit, but it would not emphasize the connection between the illusion and picture. The shadow connects the trick elements with the rest of the painting and taints it with its falseness. Looking at how it extends over the pillar in the foreground, it is hard to tell it apart from the shadows that are part of the picture proper. It is equally difficult to treat the picture any less critically than the eye-tricks surrounding it. The church and all of its pretensions have the shadow of illusion over it. A similar effect is achieved by the false black frame, an imitation of the real ones that were often used to mount paintings, so that the entire painting is enveloped and held together by illusion, casting doubt on the veracity of the ideological claims of the church.

It is worth noting, as Vanhaelen does, that the curtains and ebony frame used to protect secular seventeenth century paintings were originally used for liturgical imagery.¹⁶ De Witte, again, did not begin the trend of including these objects in paintings as a *trompe-l'œil*, but he does capture the significance of their shift in use from being protector of the sacred to protector of the profane. The frames that



Fig. 2. Panel on the pulpit in the Old Church in Delft. Wooden carving. In situ.

once held holy images still need to be filled. Iconoclasm could paint over them but not the people's desire for them. Human nature demands some kind of art, as even iconoclasts have to recognize. Putting a picture of a church in a frame reminds us that the church is itself a work of art, and the figures in the church show that its importance is such that the Calvinists could not afford to tear it down, for if they did so, they would lose the community gathering point. De Witte further alludes to this by the details in Delft's wooden pulpit, which survives in the real Oude Kerk in Delft today. The pulpit contains carvings in perspective *fig. 2* that survived the ravages of the iconoclasts, perhaps because they were too impressive to destroy, or perhaps because the pulpit is the most central and important element of a Protestant church that emphasizes the Word of God.¹⁷ We can just see one of the panels in the present painting, an image within an image within an image. By reproducing it, de Witte takes it upon himself to do what a church ideally should do, that is, giving people the art and the opportunity for reflection that they need.

The figures in the foreground of de Witte's painting provide another opportunity for such reflection. Critics have noted how the Post-Reformation Dutch like to put women nursing their children in paintings, as a way of alluding to the Virgin after she had been banned as a subject for icons.¹⁸ There is still a psychological need for that image, certainly among a community that had left Catholicism relatively recently. In our scene of the Oude Kerk, we have a motherly figure in the bottom left corner of the picture, hidden in shadow and unseen by anyone else in the painting, least of all by the preacher with his back completely to her. The man looking at the whitewash and the people in the pew likewise ignore her, despite her apparent need. Iconoclasm, then, runs contrary to human frailty and desire. For centuries people had taken comfort from the image of the Virgin, but the iconoclasts removed this source of spiritual satisfaction. It is up to de Witte and other architectural painters to rescue the church from itself and to preserve the idea of painting as an enriching force open to the needs of people like the woman in the painting.

So, after all, *A Sermon in the Old Church in Delft* turns out to be not a painting of a sermon, but a sermon on painting. The central figures of the preacher, the whitewashed wall and the man and dog admiring it are enclosed by examples of human decency and artistry. The iconoclasm they represent is trumped by de Witte's skillful tricking of the eye to show the power of painting, leaving us to wonder about the scope of influence in art, and how it can reflect our ideas yet always remain one step ahead of us.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Emmanuel de Witte, *A Sermon in the Old Church in Delft*. http://cybermuseum.gallery.ca/cybermuseum/search/artwork_zoom_e.jsp?mkey=120 (accessed March 30, 2009).
- 2 Angela Vanhaelen, "Iconoclasm and the Creation of Images in Emanuel de Witte's *Old Church in Amsterdam*," *Art Bulletin* LXXXVII, no. 2 (June 2005), 257-258. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25067171> (accessed March 30, 2009).
- 3 Jakob Rosenberg, Seymour Slive and E.H. Ter Kuhle, *Dutch Art and Architecture: 1600 to 1800* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin, 1966), 191-192.
- 4 Rosenberg et. al., *Dutch Art and Architecture*, 191-192.
- 5 Vanhaelen, "Iconoclasm and the Creation of Images in Emanuel de Witte's *Old Church in Amsterdam*," 261.
- 6 Vanhaelen, "Iconoclasm and the Creation of Images in Emanuel de Witte's *Old Church in Amsterdam*," 260.
- 7 See the pictures of the Oude Kerk in Walter A. Liedtke, *Architectural Painting in Delft* (Doornspijk, The Netherlands: Davaco, 1982), figs. 26b, 28a and 30a.

- 8 National Gallery of Canada, "Emmanuel de Witte: A Sermon in the Old Church in Delft," http://cybermuseum.gallery.ca/cybermuseum/search/artwork_e.jsp?mkey=120 (accessed March 30th 2009; Celeste Brusati, *Artifice and Illusion: The Art and Writing of Samuel von Hoogstraten* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995), 63.
- 9 Vanhaelen, "Iconoclasm and the Creation of Images in Emanuel de Witte's *Old Church in Amsterdam*," 258-59.
- 10 Bruschi, *Artifice and Illusion*, 158-159; 259.
- 11 See Liedtke, *Architectural Painting in Delft*, 27, on the challenges of "realistic imaginary" interiors.
- 12 Vanhaelen, "Iconoclasm and the Creation of Images in Emanuel de Witte's *Old Church in Amsterdam*," 259.
- 13 I have in mind here Walter Benjamin's argument about the explicit theatricality of Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre and how it mentally alienates the audience from the scene and encourages them to think of the play as a work of art. Walter Benjamin, "What is Epic Theater?" *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (Glasgow: Collins, 1979), 152-153.
- 14 Jacob Isager, *Pliny on Art and Society: The Elder Pliny's Chapters on the History of Art* (London: Routledge, 1991), 138. In this story, originally told by Pliny the Elder in the *Naturalis Historia*, the painter Zeuxis thought that he had won the contest when some birds flew to the grapes that he had painted, and demanded that Parrhasius, his opponent, throw back his curtain to reveal what he had painted. Of course, the curtain itself was the painting, and Zeuxis admitted defeat.
- 15 Liedtke, *Architectural Painting in Delft*, 15.
- 16 Vanhaelen, "Iconoclasm and the Creation of Images in Emanuel de Witte's *Old Church in Amsterdam*," 259.
- 17 Oude Kerk Delft, "History," <http://www.oudekerk-delft.nl/eng/kerkgebouw/index.html> (accessed March 30, 2009). The Web site hints that the pulpit's aesthetic appeal is the reason for its survival: "Anything that still remained inside the

church after the fire, was completely destroyed by the iconoclasts in 1566 and 1572. Only the exceptionally beautifully carved pulpit dating from 1548 survived these bitter times." The image itself can be found at <http://www.oudekerk-delft.nl/images/historie-kansel.jpg>.

18 Vanhaelen, "Iconoclasm and the Creation of Images in Emanuel de Witte's *Old Church in Amsterdam*," 255.

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