

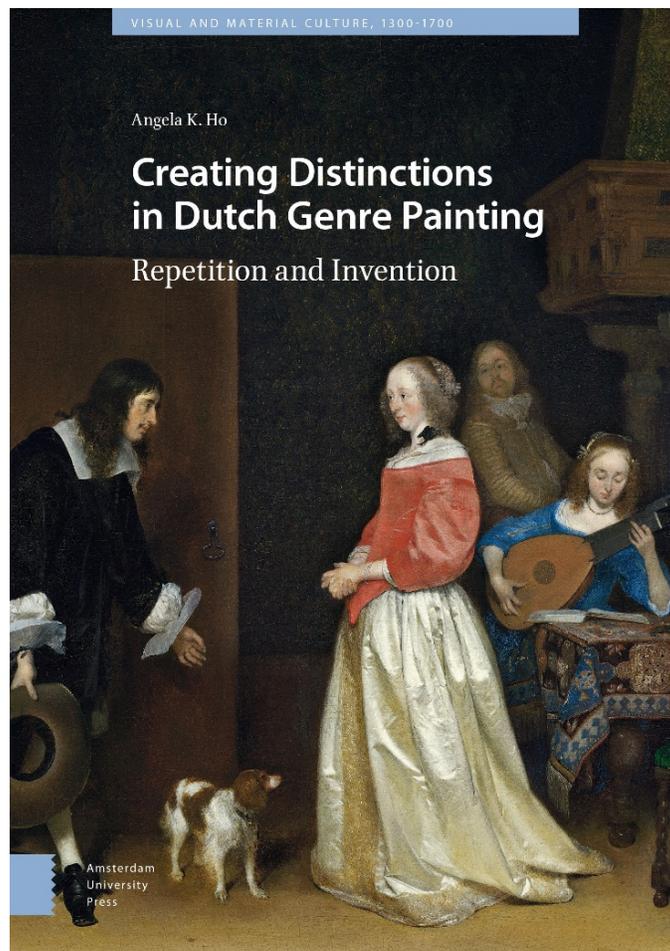
## Review

Angela K. Ho:

***Creating distinctions in Dutch genre painting:  
Repetition and invention.***

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*Reviewed by Alistair Watkins*



Angela K. Ho's *Creating distinctions in Dutch genre painting: Repetition and invention* offers a vigorous analysis of iteration as stratagem within the painter's arsenal. The foci of her analysis are Gerrit Dou, Gerard ter Borch, and Frans van Mieris, three leading figures of the *fijnschilder* ('fine painter') manner, all of whom are (near) contemporaries and decidedly active during the latter half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Ho's work explores how both artists and collectors sought to position themselves to greatest advantage throughout the economic upturn that was the Dutch Golden Age. Crucial to her analysis is the symbiotic relationship between these two groups. On the one hand, there are the painters who wish to distinguish themselves within the art market by employing various modes of particularity in an attempt to influence taste, while on the other hand, there are the *liefhebbers* ('cognoscenti' or 'learned enthusiasts') who are in constant pursuit of the self-reflecting markers that signify the embodiment of taste. So as to frame the environment of this behavioural dialogue, Ho deploys an expansile view of repetition that surpasses mere transcription where established themes, compositions, subjects and motifs function antithetically to visual innovation.

At the outset, Ho puts forward the allure of repetition for both the aforementioned groups and thereafter discusses the mediating role of painting in relation to the painter / collector dialogue. She posits the idea of a co-dependent relationship between repetition and invention, versus one without the other, as it is in said guise that she argues for their greatest impact. Ho proffers this conceptual interdependence on the basis of the perceived "interplay between familiarity and difference." In short, she makes a case for the familiarity of repetition rather than lone novelty. She goes on to identify three intertwined notions that are inextricably bound up with the painter / collector dialogue: innovative repetition, *liefhebber* and taste – the confluence of which plays an integral role in self-signification practices among the cultural elite. These notions are further explicated in the ensuing chapters, each of which focuses on the inventive use of repetition by three leading seventeenth century genre painters: Gerrit Dou, Gerard ter Borch and Frans van Mieris the Elder.

The second chapter spotlights Dou and his associated niche paintings that became signatory for him from around 1650. While conventionally seen as a labour-saving device, Ho reinterprets them collectively as an innovative self-branding stratagem. Dou's conscious repetition of this motif proved particularly successful and Ho argues that populating his niche pictures with illusionistic objects from contemporary material culture in the manner of the curiosity cabinet by means of established motifs allowed such images to function reflexively. The result is that the *liefhebbers* could actively demonstrate their connoisseurship and acquire these objects as self-signifying confirmations. Ter Borch is the focus of the third and most convincing chapter. Ho explores his inventive approach toward

material elegance and situational ambiguity by examining his inventive reassignment of stock figures to hitherto familiar yet non-associated contexts. Ho argues that this repeated juxtapositional strategy is the hallmark of Ter Borch's inventiveness. This disconnect served to challenge *liefhebber* expectations, forcing them to eagerly deploy their connoisseurship anew, thereby reigniting the interplay between familiarity and inventive difference.

The fourth chapter moves generationally to a younger contemporary of both Ter Borch and Dou, namely Frans van Mieris, who looked to both artists as heuristic models that would frame his own inventive strategy of imitation and repetition. Van Mieris operated within a period of economic contraction toward the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, during the waning of the Golden Age. As a byproduct of this downturn many a *liefhebber* had retreated to the safe acquisition of old master paintings and were less likely to seek out the works of contemporary artists. Van Mieris's stratagem was to engage in two simultaneous dialogues. While the first was the ongoing dialogue between artist and *liefhebber*, Ho argues for the emergence of a new and competitive dialogue, one between generations of artists. Van Mieris's tasteful and selective emulation of Dou and Ter Borch's distinctiveness served as a link to a previous and familiar age, resulting in a stylized, innovative yet recognizable take on familiar themes and motifs. Ho also confronts the standard accusations that have been traditionally leveled at Van Mieris's late works, which deemed them products of creative decline. She persuasively situates these works within the context of a general and deliberate shift by his peers toward greater finish and stylization alongside a similar shift in collectors' tastes.

Focusing on three leading *fijnschilders*, Gerrit Dou, Gerard ter Borch and Frans van Mieris, Angela Ho makes a vigorous and convincing argument for the existence of dialogue between the two main groups that largely shaped the market for genre painting in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Netherlands; the artists and the *liefhebbers*. Having been situated at the top end of the art market, this dialogue was effected via a set of tools that were at the disposal of their respective groups. Thus, repetition, invention and connoisseurship were in a state of constant negotiation within a broader economic context. The interplay of these notions was decidedly important as stratagems for self-branding by artists and self-signification by *liefhebbers*. Ho is to be commended for bringing fresh insights to what has often been a conventional interpretation of repetition and invention in relation to a slew of pictures with which we are now newly acquainted.

**About the reviewer**

Alistair Watkins is a Ph.D. student in art history at the University of Toronto (Canada) under the supervision of Dr. Ethan Matt Kavaler. In his doctoral dissertation he seeks to reinterpret Pieter Aertsen's genre paintings as part of a new hybridized classicism within the Netherlandish canon. He did his first degree in art history at the University of Edinburgh (Scotland), then completed a research master's degree at Utrecht University (Netherlands), and worked with the Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage at the Centre for the Study of the Flemish Primitives in Brussels (Belgium). During that time, he was an editorial assistant for the 2013 International Van Eyck Symposium and was also charged with translating art historical conference and research papers from Dutch and French into English. Furthermore, he assisted with documenting the initial phases of the Ghent altarpiece restoration project. In 2014, he was a visiting scholar and editorial assistant at Gemäldegalerie-Berlin (Germany) under the direction of Dr. Stephan Kemperdick, translating parts of the accompanying catalogue for the exhibition *The Ghent altarpiece by the brothers Van Eyck: History and appraisal*. He translated and edited research papers (including some for scientific/technical art history) that are now published by the Rembrandt Online Database.