

# The five senses in the work of Jan Miense Molenaer: Parody, satire, and rhyparography

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Jan Miense Molenaer's *Five senses* series at the *Mauritshuis* consists of five small oil paintings on wood, each dealing with one of the five senses. The senses are not embodied by allegorical figures, but experienced by groups of commonplace, even vulgar, characters. The painter parodies a traditional motif by transferring it into a comic register based on a humble aesthetic. This humorous reversal is complemented by a satirical spirit that reflects the complexity of thought and expectations in the mercantile society of the United Provinces. Jan Miense Molenaer positions himself as a rhyparographer, seeking to praise triviality using plastic details and literary references. In this way, the five senses are used not only to entertain the audience but also to play with social categories, from middle class to peasant, following the rhythm imposed by the Aristotelian hierarchy.

Key terms: Jan Miense Molenaer; *Five senses*; rhyparography; parody; satire; paradoxical *encomium*; theatricality.

## 1. Introduction

The motif of the five senses has had a prominent place in the artistic imagination since Antiquity and the writings of Aristotle and Plato. It became an iconographic theme in the Middle Ages, and has continued to develop ever since, particularly in religious, mythological, and allegorical imagery.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the series of five senses, particularly in Northern Europe and Italy, became a fixed series and a prefabricated motif (de Jongh 1997, 25), traditionally treated allegorically because this type of representation was exceedingly popular in that time period. Veldman (1994-1995, 56) defines an allegory as "*een zinnebeeldige voorstelling waarin een abstract begrip wordt uitgedrukt*" ('a figurative representation expressing an abstract

concept'). This codification was taken up by Flemish artists in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, as can be seen in the series of five senses by Jan Brueghel the Elder and Peter Paul Rubens on display at the Prado Museum. Sight is associated with a mirror, taste with fruit, smell with flowers, hearing with musical instruments and touch with a harp. It should be noted that the structure and hierarchy of this series does not derive from a natural order but "is fixed by customs and traditions" (Vinge 1975, 995).

Variations on this motif went hand in hand with social changes occurring in the society in which they took hold. The establishment of the Republic of the United Provinces marked the advent of the genre scene, in which painters depicted scenes inspired by everyday life in the Netherlands, adopting a realistic aesthetic. The real effects of this new genre were not at all documentary, but rather highly theatrical. More than an aesthetic, a rhetorical stance, a moral standard, and a particular sense of humour also characterized genre scenes. In this evolving context, the motif of the five senses was taken up by several artists, with a new way of thinking. Their representation distanced itself from allegory and took a more comic turn.

Jan Miense Molenaer was one of those involved in the new aesthetic of the motif, as demonstrated by his series of the five senses, which is kept in the *Mauritshuis*<sup>1</sup> in The Hague and consists of five small oil paintings on wood, each dealing with one of the senses. They are not embodied by symbolic personifications but experienced by groups of banal and vulgar characters. Jan Miense Molenaer parodies a traditional theme by switching from a high allegorical register to a coarse comic register, thus creating a comic inversion. The series criticizes the excesses of certain social categories, from rhetoricians to peasants. The five paintings represent not just one category of the population, but several organized according to a descending social hierarchy that follows the Aristotelian hierarchy of the five senses, from the noblest to the most vulgar. The plastic details and the allusions to popular literature reinforce the complexity of the work, which is not a simple series of grotesque scenes, but a paradoxical *encomium* ('an expression of praise') in which Jan Miense Molenaer is a rhyarographer or the one who seeks to praise triviality.

## 2. Background and description: Details of a comic series

The series is dated 1637, when Jan Miense Molenaer and his wife Judith Leyster, a successful painter, left Haarlem for Amsterdam. This spatial change also appears to have brought about a pictorial change. Weller, Von Bogendorf Rupprath & Westermann (2002, 18) show that peasant imagery, which had only sporadically

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<sup>1</sup> The *Mauritshuis* is an art museum situated in The Hague (The Netherlands).

attracted Molenaer before his departure from Haarlem, became the focus of his art once he was settled in Amsterdam.

The *Five senses* from the *Mauritshuis* is a good example of this specialization. The painter takes the traditional theme of the five senses and treats it in a humble setting, a parodic reversal already adopted by painters such as Adriaen Brouwer and Adriaen van Ostade. Humble genre scenes are strongly linked to the comic register, and hence it appears that the painter broke from the allegorical treatment of the senses to follow the line of narrative and humorous representations of sensoriality. While the allegorical treatment presents personifications of the senses or the divinities linked to them associated with symbolic attributes or animals, the more narrative and comic treatment of the five senses depicts a sensory experience in which the sense is felt and not just symbolized. In what follows, we will examine how Molenaer recovers and reappropriates this comic sensory treatment.

There is strong scholarly consensus (Hofstede de Groot 1894; Harms 1927; Martin 1935; Plietzch 1960; Brown 1984; Schama 1988; De Boer & Leistra 1991; Christie & Wadum 1992; Weller 1992; Welu & Biesboer 1993; Slive 1995; Weller, Von Bogendorf Rupprath & Westermann 2002; Van Suchtelen & Buvelot 2016) that the painter classified the series according to the Aristotelian hierarchy: sight, hearing, taste, smell, touch (Aristotle 1966, 46-66). The artist's monogram appears on the first four panels, while on the last one – *Touch* – his signature appears at the bottom right. The series is set in a tavern, evoked by a table or a beer barrel and chairs, where three figures are systematically experiencing their senses. Jan Miense Molenaer, like many of his contemporaries and predecessors, synthesizes *tronies*<sup>2</sup> and genre scenes. In the tradition of narrative sensory treatment, the senses usually appear either through the heightened reaction of an isolated character against an undefined background,<sup>3</sup> or through that of more or less noble characters who coexist in the same space. Here, meanings are revealed through a double reaction: the reaction of the character and of those around him. Jan Miense Molenaer depicts expressive characters with grotesque behaviour in spaces defined by a set and a scenario (Van Suchtelen & Buvelot 2016, 169).

Let us first analyze each panel one by one to gain a full understanding. *Sight*, measuring 23.9 by 19.7 centimeters, begins the series.

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<sup>2</sup> This genre originated in the Netherlands in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and refers to the French word *trogne* ('face'). *Tronies* are expressive and grotesque and are used as studies or as works in their own right.

<sup>3</sup> Another example is Adriaen Brouwer's *The bitter drink*, 1636-1638, Frankfurt, Städtisches Kunstinstitut.



Figure 1. Jan Miense Molenaer, *Sight*, 1637, Mauritshuis, The Hague. Photo courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

The panel depicts a man and a woman staring at the bottom of a brownstone beer jug with its metal lid open. These figures refer to the figure of the *kannenkijker* (literally ‘he who stares at the jug’; ‘heavy drinker’), which was very popular in the Dutch imagination of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Their faces are lit by an oil lamp on the table. There is also a pan of coals on which the man can light his pipe, which is currently extinguished in his left hand. The bearded man with slightly rosy cheeks seems pensive as he looks in the jug. He wears a large hat; his somewhat faded outfit still looks quite sophisticated, as evidenced by the *épauettes* (‘ornamental shoulder piece’), the slim fit and the double collar. The blue and rusty colours of his garment break with the sobriety of those worn by the woman: a modest white cap covering most of her hair. The shadows cast by the flame allow a glimpse of the last figure, a stout man with a feathered hat. We are

in an enclosed space, where the only source of light is artificial, creating a strong play of *chiaroscuro*.<sup>4</sup>

Apparently, Jan Miense Molenaer wanted the viewer's gaze to be drawn to the male figure in the foreground. There is a dual dynamic in which the *kannenkijker* ('he who stares at the jug'; 'heavy drinker') is the main character and the other two are relegated to the background, both in terms of visuals and narrative. However, as in the theatre, every character is important, so every figure, even the one at the back, allows the viewer to understand that the subject of the scene is sight. Genre scenes of this period are marked by a great theatricality: everything is a *mise-en-scène* ('arrangement of actors and scenery as in theatre') in which every detail gives meaning to the work and gives it an effect of reality (Westermann 1997a, 380-382). This tradition of pictorial theatricality went hand in hand with the strong development of theatre in the United Provinces at the time, which artists were also in the habit of representing in painting. There was therefore a strong connection between the two arts (Westermann 1997a, 380-382).

In Molenaer's painting, the protagonist is trying to look at the bottom of the jug in front of him, the woman beside him is trying to do the same but with greater difficulty because she is slightly to one side, and the man with his back to the scene is urinating (Van Suchtelen & Buvelot 2016, 169), so that he has his back to the scene and is completely blind to it. There is therefore a degradation in the use of sight. Moreover, the artificiality of the half-light creates a certain difficulty for the characters, who are not in the easiest of conditions to use their sight. Jan Miense Molenaer seems to want the viewer to participate. Indeed, according to Schiller (2007, 79-82), there is a multisensoriality in this series: it is not only the depicted characters who have a sensory experience but also the spectators. They must squint to see all the details because of the *chiaroscuro* ('strong contrast between light and dark') and the small size of the work. Thus, the observer can adopt the same pensive attitude as the man or the amused one of the woman in order to try to perceive the entire composition.

The second panel in the series is called *Hearing*, measuring 24.3 by 19.3 centimeters.

Once again, three figures animate the work, this time all with visible faces and seated around a beer barrel, on which a rooster is painted in white (Van Suchtelen & Buvelot 2016, 172). The cheerful-looking man in a three-quarter turn is the main character. The viewer does not know the nature of the sound that comes out of his mouth, but it could just as easily be a simple sentence as a poem or a song. This character is dressed in a silky almond green tunic, and white

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<sup>4</sup> *Chiaroscuro* is the use of strong contrasts between light and dark.

trousers, his bright red beret contrasting with the brightness of the rest of his outfit. He holds a closed beer mug in his left hand and seems to be waving the other. Opposite him, a man with dull complexion and clothes is looking at the laughing man. In his hand, he holds a small finger instrument, which appears to be a ratchet. Behind him stands another laughing figure who has been identified as an old woman: this hypothesis is probable in view of the headdress worn, which is similar to the cap of the woman in the first painting. She is looking at the figure in the red beret with laughter and waving her right hand.



*Figure 2. Jan Miense Molenaer, Hearing, 1637, Mauritshuis, The Hague. Photo courtesy Wikimedia Commons.*

Hearing is suggested here by the half-open mouths of the two laughing figures and their hands, which seem to follow the rhythm of a melody. In addition, the small percussion instruments in the hands of the last figure reinforce the viewer's understanding of the subject of the painting. The main character

contrasts with the other two in that he is portrayed in much greater detail, both physically and in terms of dress, which seems to give him a certain plastic and social superiority. This treatment is in stark contrast to the allegorical one found in the work by Brueghel the Elder and Rubens in the Prado, where hearing is symbolized by a multitude of musical instruments. Here, on the contrary, the viewer must draw on his memory and imagination (Schiller 2007, 77) to try to perceive the sound coming out of the mouth of the man with the red beret.



Figure 3. Jan Miense Molenaer, *Taste*, 1637, Mauritshuis, The Hague. Photo courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

Then comes the 24.3 by 19.6 centimeters panel depicting *Taste*. This third panel depicts a peasant leaning back in his chair to take a large sip of beer. He wears a more modest outfit than the figures in the two previous compositions. He is wearing a humble cap and on the back of his chair hangs a red hat with a thick

fur band. A second figure is lighting his pipe with coals from the brazier on the table. He is again wearing a feathered cap, a model we have already seen in the two previous panels. Behind him is a figure, probably female, if we are to judge by her headdress and the other paintings showing two men and a woman.

In this panel, we are confronted with the figure of the drinker, an extremely recurrent motif in tavern scenes and merry companies, themes that were very popular at the time. There is a great triviality about the man holding the jug tightly and tilting it sharply to make sure he does not miss a drop. There is a dual dynamic in the colouring, as once again the character who appears to be the protagonist is wearing the most colourful clothes. The background remains in brownish tones, but lightens up slightly on the right, moving towards beige tones, certainly signaling a source of light located outside the frame.

Taste, the sense, is clearly indicated by the drinker, but also by the smoker by lighting his pipe in the pot of glowing coals. The old woman in the background is placed as an admonishing character, creating a link between the viewer and the scene, breaking the fourth wall. She is as much an actress as a spectator of the scene, since she does not engage in any activity that refers to taste. The two men seem too concentrated on their activities to be aware of her presence and ours at the same time. This indifference certainly reflects the uncontrolled or even unreasonable nature of their activity, leading to drunkenness in the case of one and dry drunkenness (Van Suchtelen & Buvelot 2016, 172) in the case of the other.

Following the Aristotelian hierarchy, smell comes after taste.

*Smell*, measuring 24.3 by 19.5 centimeters, offers a bird's eye view of the dirty buttocks of a little boy sitting on the lap of a woman who is wiping them. The boy is dressed in the same colours as the protagonist in the previous work. The woman is dressed in a white blouse, a beige corset with a red border, and a blue skirt, which sets her apart from the other female characters in the series, making her the central character of this panel. The stench seems unbearable, as shown by the disgusted expression of the male character on the left who is plugging his nose. He is holding a beer mug in his left hand; his smoking kit is on the table. A laughing man observes the scene from his place in the background.





Figure 4. Jan Miense Molenaer, *Smell*, 1637, Mauritshuis, The Hague. Photo courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

Once again, we find the mechanics introduced in the other paintings: two men and a woman, while the child occupies more of an accessory position than a character. Moreover, we find the same dynamic in terms of colours: the protagonist wears a brightly coloured outfit while the secondary characters have dull outfits and shades that place them in the background. A contrast also appears in the background of the scene. Indeed, the back of the scene changes from dark brown to off-white, suggesting a source of light in the background left.

Finally, the series concludes with the 24.3 x 19.6 centimeters panel depicting *Touch*. A man, wearing a modest orange and yellow outfit with a hole in the elbow, looks at the viewer with a lecherous smile and slips his hand under a woman's skirt. She grabs him by the hair and lifts her slipper to strike him to stop his inappropriate gesture. His garment is in very poor condition, with worn sleeve ends and holes. Technical records indicate that initially the man's arm appears to have been painted between the woman's legs. Then the skirt was lengthened to cover more of the arm and the blue petticoat was added (Van Suchtelen & Buvelot 2016, 172). A man sitting at the table is amused by this grotesque situation. He is

wearing the same kind of outfit as the secondary male figures in the other paintings in the series, once again wearing a modest feathered hat. We may wonder why Jan Miense Molenaer has corrected the painting by lengthening the woman's skirt. Since the beginning of this description, we have repeatedly referred to the participatory nature of the paintings. In 1637, the audience for these paintings certainly belonged to the middle class, which was the main demand factor in the Dutch art market at the time. As mentioned above, this social category was amused by the coarseness of the tavern scenes and the people who frequented them, but it was important not to exceed a certain level of impropriety (Westermann 1997b).



Figure 5. Jan Miense Molenaer, *Touch*, 1637, Mauritshuis, The Hague. Photo courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

Although the senses are represented individually, there is an overall dynamic that unites them. Schiller's (2007) article, "*To see ourselves greatly misled*": *The laughing deceptions of Jan Miense Molenaer's Five senses (1637)*, provides the basis for this overview. Schiller (2007) notes that if the works were

juxtaposed according to the traditional hierarchy, the main characters would, for the most part, be sitting back-to-back. This organization creates a “rhythmic oscillation” (Schiller 2007, 79), allowing the series to have a certain harmony. Jan Miense Molenaer thought of each work as part of a whole, thus taking up the serial and artificial organization of sensoriality. We note that, in addition to Schiller's (2007) analysis, there seems to be a certain division in the overall dynamic between *Sight* and *Hearing* on the one hand, and *Taste*, *Smell* and *Touch* on the other. Indeed, the first two protagonists are back-to-back, then the character of *Taste*, instead of facing the character of *Hearing*, places himself in the same position. Then, the rhythm resumes, the latter is facing the woman of *Smell*, who has her back to the couple of *Touch*. The series thus seems to be in two stages, taking up the Platonic duality of the traditional hierarchy, placing the first two senses as distinct from the last three. In the Platonic circles, we find a distinction between the higher senses (sight, hearing) and the lower senses (taste, smell, touch) (De Jongh 1997, 25).

Finally, the treatment of light also plays a key role in this “rhythmic oscillation” (Schiller 2007, 79). First, the panel depicting *Sight* gives way to a *chiaroscuro* (‘strong contrast between light and dark’) – echoing the pictorial codes of the Utrecht *Caravaggisti* (‘followers of the Italian Baroque painter Caravaggio’) embodied by Gerrit van Honthorst (1590-1656) –, then the figures in *Hearing* come to life against a uniformly dark brown background. A first contrast appears in the background of *Taste*, where a luminous halo in beige tones stands out in the background on the right, behind the old woman. It intensifies and brightens in the next canvas, this time appearing in the left background. In the last painting, an opening is clearly visible, a dark brown wall can be seen stopping a quarter of the way through the composition, the rest of the background is painted in off-white tones, creating a fairly clear light effect. There is a gradation of light, from an artificial treatment of light created by the *chiaroscuro* due to the oil lamp to a more natural treatment suggested by a large opening in the background.

These rhythmic and luminous dynamics create a union between the scenes, introducing a certain theatricality to the series, where each panel can only be fully understood as the counterpart of another.

### 3. The parody game

In Jan Miense Molenaer's *Five senses*, the tavern becomes the setting for various sensory experiences of a wide range of grotesque characters. Molenaer places the scenes in a seemingly realistic world, in contrast to the symbolic framework of the allegorical representations of the senses. The tavern also breaks with the decency and elegance of other realistic spaces, such as the bourgeois or noble interiors of

certain genre scenes or portraits, where the senses can also be represented. The tavern is therefore a suitable setting for a humorous treatment. The characters in this space differ in every respect from the allegorical or noble figures present in the traditional symbolic treatment of the senses. Moreover, the activities in which they engage have nothing noble about them and are banal or even vulgar.

Jan Miense Molenaer deviated from the traditional allegorical treatment of the five senses, like several of his predecessors and contemporaries, for instance Frans Hals, Adriaen Brouwer and Adriaen van Ostade. He created his own parody of the sensory treatment, taking up comic motifs but also literary codes established, for example, by the theatre of the *Rederijkers* ('members of literary guilds typical of the Low Countries of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries'). Indeed, it is necessary to understand the painting of the genre scenes as being closely related to the literature of the *Rederijkerskamers* ('chambers of rhetoric' or 'literary guilds'), because similar situations, characters, morals, and derision can be found there (Heppner 1939-1940).

Let us analyze Molenaer's parodic treatment in the *Mauritshuis* series in detail. First, let us look at the light treatment in the panel depicting *Sight*. The *chiaroscuro* ('contrast between light and dark') of the flame and the calm, attentive attitudes of the two figures could suggest a nocturnal Nativity scene. Indeed, in this kind of representation, all eyes are riveted on the source of light embodied by Christ. In our case, there is a parodic reversal, since the object of all attention is a jug of beer lit by the almost sacred light of a candle. We can compare the attitudes of the characters of Jan Miense Molenaer with those of the sacred assembly of the *Adoration of the Christ Child* by Gerrit van Honthorst dated 1619-1620. The Virgin Mary pays the same loving attention to the Christ Child as the man and woman in the tavern to the pitcher. This profanation of the *pathos chiaroscuro* ('an aesthetic that contrasts light and dark to express an emotional appeal') used in religious works clearly demonstrates the parodic and rhyparographic approach of Jan Miense Molenaer, who wants to sublimate the vulgar. The two characters only have eyes for the jug, which seems almost empty. Their eyesight here only serves to focus on the rest of the beer, making them blind to the rest of the world. Their source of light comes only from this drink, as evidenced by the lamp placed just below the jug. Traditionally, sight is what allows a global knowledge of the world and even an encounter with God through the *visio dei* ('vision of God'); here, on the contrary, the use of sight is only meant for one futile thing. The figure in the background, who is sometimes described as urinating (Welu & Biesboer 1993, 235), is in the dark, which could mean that he sees nothing, in a literal sense but also figuratively, he is ignorant or even dull-witted. Jan Miense Molenaer also seems to be playing with the audience, as this is the only painting where no one is facing forward.

*Hearing* could be compared with Gonzales Coques' representation (painted before 1661), in which we see a man playing the lute, a traditional instrument to symbolize hearing and harmony. Jan Miense Molenaer, on the other hand, chooses to break with this harmonious approach, placing a small percussion instrument between the fingers of the figure in the feathered hat, which evokes a much more violent sound than that instigated by the stringed instrument, creating a parodic reversal. The viewer's imagination (Schiller 2007) is called upon, as no clue as to the nature of the central character's declamation appears in the scene. Thus, it could just as well be a rhetorical poem as a folk song. The viewer is placed as an actor to guess not only the sound that comes out of the central character's mouth, but also to perceive the ambient hubbub of the tavern emanating from the singing, talking, laughing, and grumbling of the drinking and drunken patrons. This exchange between the canvas and the audience is suggested by the visual link that is established between the protagonist and the audience. Even more than a hubbub, it seems that the painter is trying to show a kind of disharmony in his work, since he is placing himself at the opposite end of the allegorical spectrum.

Jan Miense Molenaer parodies allegorical harmony to create a comic disorder. This application of chaos is one of the most convincing mechanisms for depicting modest life, and thus stands in opposition to the measure and harmony of bourgeois or noble high society (Weller, Von Bogendorf Rupprath & Westermann 2002, 54). Creating undisciplined chaos is meticulous work, being sometimes more complex than creating discipline. The structure of disorder is also strongly present in the theatre of the time, as evidenced by the work of the playwright Jan Vos, who created chaotic-looking plays for the Amsterdam theatre (Weller, Von Bogendorf Rupprath & Westermann 2002, 54). According to Vos: "Whoever wants to keep order in this disorder of life, will himself become the disorder, because he will deviate from the truth" (Weller, Von Bogendorf Rupprath & Westermann 2002, 54). Representing disorder is not simply a mockery of the sometimes-chaotic lifestyle of the lower classes, but a search for truth and spontaneity. In *Hearing*, Jan Miense Molenaer does not play with the accessories to stage the disorder, but with the atmosphere of the scene, the attitudes of the characters. Westermann (1997c, 73) notes that "the most specific comic sign is the laughing face in an image, frequently directed at the beholder," allowing a real participation of the spectator who finds himself facing the work as if it were a playlet.

In *Taste*, on the other hand, two props identify the meaning: a jug and a pipe, two elements that may appear in middle class genre scenes. Jan Miense Molenaer parodies this type of scene by depicting a drinker and an excessive

smoker from lower society. This iconography of the *gula*<sup>5</sup> drinker is not new, as shown by Dürer's engraving *Männerbad* (1496) (Nordenfalk 1985, 16). As for the smoker, he is absorbed in his activity, his head tilted downwards in the direction of the pan of glowing coals. He is the only character in the series who is depicted smoking, although a pipe appears in all the paintings. Although tobacco use in the 17<sup>th</sup> century had become more respectable than in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, when it was outlawed and reserved for outcasts and peasants (Gaskell 1997, 68-77), smoking here seems to be a boorish act. It is the posture, rather than the practice, that gives the characters their vulgar dimension, as they adopt brusque and excessive positions that evoke a certain bestiality, in contrast to the civility and restrained ideal expected of members of the middle class. Indeed, the figure is hunched over, his neck tucked into his shoulders, holding the coal pot firmly and inhaling the smoke. Furthermore, the presence of the dagger on the drinker's belt, seen slightly from the back, suggests that this binge drinking could end in a fight at any moment (Van Suchtelen & Buvelot 2016, 169).

From the beginning of the series, we can see that there is a gradation in the agitation. The *kannenkijkers* ('he who stares at the jug') of *Sight* sit calmly in an intimate darkness adopting a pensive or even nostalgic air. Then come the jolly fellows of *Hearing* who come to life in a joyful and good-natured atmosphere. Finally, the characters of *Taste*, although fully occupied by their activities, have their heads tilted in three different directions, which lends a certain dynamism to the composition. We must keep in mind that all this is staging; in fact, the *Rederijerskamers* ('chambers of rhetoric' or 'literary guilds') or even the members of the middle class were not necessarily examples of restraint and righteousness, quite the contrary. Alcohol consumption was quite high among these specific social groups and did not by any means respect the restraint expected in Protestant society. As for members of the peasantry, they were, at the time, seen as creatures who did not fit any code of Dutch civic society. It was therefore necessary to exacerbate the outrageous behavior of the latter to reduce that of the middle classes. Hence, it becomes clear that the paintings contribute to the development of a mercantile identity, which is rooted in a demonization of peasant society.

The penultimate panel is *Smell*. The comic register becomes more and more intense, because instead of the pleasant scent of flowers, it is the nauseating smell of a child's excrement that refers to the olfactory sense. This stench is made tangible by the disgust of the character on the left who is plugging his nose. The first thing the viewer sees when looking at this painting is the back of a child being wiped. Adriaen Brouwer also played with this vulgar motif in his panel *Unpleasant*

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<sup>5</sup> *Gula* is the Latin word for the cardinal sin of gluttony.

*paternal duties*, which was painted a few years before this series. Jan Miense Molenaer seems to be quoting him by taking the motif and adapting it to his painting. In the latter, however, the roles are reversed: the woman wipes the child while the man reacts to the stench. Similarly, in Brouwer's work we see the faces of only two figures, whereas in Molenaer's work, as in the whole series, three figures are visible. The third character in *Smell* is in the background and is laughing out loud at the scene. He seems almost ignored by the other protagonists as if he is not really part of the group. He is the spectator of the scene, which allows the observer to identify with him. Even so, it is not he who assumes the role of the admonishing character but the woman, who appears to feel weariness rather than disgust, unlike the father in Brouwer's work. She may have this reaction because she is used to changing her child. However, as shown by Schiller (2007, 79-82), Molenaer seeks to involve the observer. Hence, it may also be that, by staring at them, the woman is trying to make the viewers understand that she is tired of their derisive laughter. This interpretation has the advantage of reestablishing the interaction between the characters and the audience that is present in the other paintings, and which contributes greatly, in our opinion, to the parodic dynamic of the series. Indeed, in allegorical iconographies of the senses, there is no link between the viewer and the viewed, but a barrier is placed between the two to sacralize the work in some way, whereas Jan Miense Molenaer breaks the fourth wall by involving the viewers, making the work livelier and more spontaneous (Schiller 2007, 79).

Finally, as we have seen, the series ends with *Touch*. The painter seems to be parodying the bourgeois couples who embrace each other in courtly representations of touch. All elegance and chivalry have disappeared to make way for a certain violence and lechery. This kind of coarse motif, in which a man furrows his hand under a woman's skirt, is extremely common in the comic genre, particularly in the peasant genre. It is in stark contrast to the worldly couple we find in the engraving of *Touching* by Cornelis van Kittensteyn after Dirck Hals preserved in the *Rijksmuseum*,<sup>6</sup> for example. The delicate hand movements of the lovers embracing in the engraving are transformed into rough movements in the *Mauritshuis* series. There is no eye contact between the two protagonists: the woman looks at the man, while he looks at the viewer. Moreover, in contrast to traditional representations of this kind of couple, the woman is the dominant figure, standing taller than the man and taking up the most space. Jan Miense Molenaer thus parodies the respectable and discreet behaviour of a bourgeois woman of the time. Incidentally, a husband being beaten by his wife is also a comic

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<sup>6</sup> The *Rijksmuseum* is the national museum of the Netherlands dedicated to Dutch art and history. It is situated in Amsterdam.

motif in the plays of the *Rederijkers* ('members of literary guilds typical of the Low Countries of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries'). Once again, we find a third character who is a spectator of the scene and wears the same feathered hat.

Each individual panel thus presents parodic mechanisms that contribute to the overall comedy of the work. The construction of the series, however, is also based on a comic inversion. Jan Miense Molenaer takes the traditional code of sensory perception that respects the Aristotelian hierarchy and the Platonic dual vision between higher and lower senses but reduces the use of sensoriality to banality or even vulgarity. Indeed, while in Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the senses were seen as indispensable tools to gain knowledge of the world – although admittedly they could be deceptive – they are not used at all to develop universal knowledge in this series, but are, on the contrary, reduced to crude and individual use. The senses lose all the nobility they assume in many profane or religious iconographic representations. They become almost useless or even ridiculous.

Thus, it appears that Jan Miense Molenaer parodies the traditional, middle-class representation and perception of the senses, and also, that it is highly likely that this entire parodic mechanism is at the service of another comic genre: satire. Indeed, we feel that the work can be interpreted as a satirical vision of society, but with a twist. The painter does not only offer a satirical vision of peasant society but also targets the mercantile society of guilds and chambers of rhetoric ('*Rederijkerkamers*').

#### 4. The satirical spirit

The genre scene is a work that seeks to imitate everyday life. It stages elements that were familiar to people living at the time to create a contemporary space that refers to a national or even regional visual identity. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, everyday life in the United Provinces was marked by strong urbanization, and this movement came with a certain marginalization of rural and peasant populations. As Salomon (2004, 93-106) points out in her book *Shifting priorities. Gender and genre in seventeenth-century Dutch painting*, the *burgermaatschappij* ('urban or mercantile society') was developed in opposition to peasant society, both in terms of mentality and visual representation.

The peasant genre emerged in previous centuries. In the Middle Ages, peasants regularly appeared in representations of the months and seasons, as part of an iconographic tradition of the hardworking peasant. Then, in the first quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, painters such as Adriaen Brouwer, and Adriaen and Isack van Ostade, updated the imagery by separating the peasant from his field and depicting him in enclosed spaces. In these scenes, the boorishness and brutality of the peasant were no longer associated with the drudgery of the work but



became, instead, stereotypical character traits. The taverns or brothels in which the peasant was depicted appeared seemingly untouched by the process of modernization that was taking place in the cities of the United Provinces. This ultimately led to a double rupture, both spatial and temporal, as Salomon (2004, 95) points out.

Mercantile identity developed in opposition to peasant identity. Not surprisingly, the resulting social divisions were reflected in the visual representations and literary works of the time. Peasant scenes, for instance, were omnipresent in 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch bourgeois collections, quite probably because they represented a counterexample to the identity the mercantile class was developing. Peasant iconography, predictably, was also used to evoke clichés in the rhetorical literature produced by the *Rederijkers* ('members of literary guilds typical of the Low Countries of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries'), who were, after all, almost exclusively members of the bourgeoisie. Thus, the peasant genre became a parameter in the development of urban identity. Jan Miense Molenaer's series takes up this middle-class and caricatured construction of rurality, and this, we believe, explains the satirical dimension of his work.

Even so, we would like to examine more in depth this characteristic of Molenaer's series about which there appears to be scholarly agreement: the social background of the characters. Jan Miense Molenaer is said to have depicted rough and crude peasants in all five paintings. However, there is an evolution in the series: the treatment of the characters is not the same from one work to the next.

*Sight* presents relatively calm characters; the man's outfit is rather neat and sophisticated compared to the garment worn by the man depicted in *Touch*. There is a more complex plastic treatment, due to the *chiaroscuro* ('strong contrast between light and dark') and the details of the texture of the clothes and the grain of the skin. In addition, as explained earlier, the scene references the figure of the *kannenkijker* ('he who stares at the jug'; 'heavy drinker'), which was more closely related to the *Rederijkers* ('members of literary guilds typical of the Low Countries of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries') than to the peasants in Jan Miense Molenaer's time (Van Bruaene & Van Bouchante 2017). This association was first made by the Leiden town clerk Jan Van Hout (1542-1609) in a satirical text in 1578, in which he referred to the "*penssen mit dranc verladen*" ('bellies full of drink') (Van Bruaene & Van Bouchante 2017, 20) of the *Rederijkers* ('members of the chambers of rhetoric'). Van Hout, however, did not introduce the word *kannenkijker* ('he who stares at the jug'; 'heavy drinker'). It is attested for the first time in the writings of Van der Haagen (about 1615-1669): "*dit nu by velen schier een gemeen spreek-woort geworden is: Retorijckers/Wijvensmijters/Kannen-kijckers*" ('It has become, for many, almost a common saying: rhetoricians, wife-beaters, jug watchers') (Van Bruaene & Van Bouchante 2017, 20). Drinking and

drunkenness were indeed essential aspects of *rederijker* culture (Van Bruaene & Van Bouchante 2017), and a custom mocked by their contemporaries who associated the words *Rederijkers* and *kannenkijkers* in a single expression, according to medievalist Herman Pleij (1988, 183), who describes their literary output as “*het quasi-literair geknutsel van halve analfabeten die eerder de kruik minden dan het woord: rederijkers, kannenkijkers!*” (‘fake literary tinkering of half illiterates who loved the jug more than the written word: rhetoricians, jug watchers’). It appears then that the bourgeoisie and, in fact, in particular the *Rederijkers* (‘chambers of rhetoric’) may have used degrading peasant iconography composed of disorderly tavern scenes and drunken characters to legitimize their own excessive consumption of alcohol.

However, it is necessary to clarify the place drinking occupied in Dutch society of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Significantly, drinking in social settings was linked to the important Dutch notion of *gezelligheid* (‘conviviality’). In fact, drinking and drunkenness were fundamental to the ideal of sociability and were an essential social act in the culture of the guilds and rhetorical clubs. As a consequence, the *burgermoraal* (‘Dutch bourgeois or middle-class morality’) did not oppose the consumption of alcohol in society, but only if the drinking was done in moderation. Two kinds of drunkenness were distinguished: a healthy or decent form of drinking accepted by bourgeois morality and an unhealthy or indecent one, which can be seen depicted in most peasant iconographies. The association of the *Rederijkers* (‘members of the chambers of rhetoric’) with the *kannenkijkers* (‘heavy drinkers’) therefore seems to run counter to the middle-class ideal of moderation.

In this regard, Van Bruaene & Van Bouchante (2017, 25-29) rightly argue that the moralizing tone many authors have found in texts, written by the *Rederijkers* (‘members of chambers of rhetoric’), must be nuanced, as there are more texts with irony, self-parody, and spiritual references than texts steeped in a measured bourgeois morality. For example, the *Rederijkers* (‘members of the chambers of rhetoric’) adopted the saying, *Rederijkers, kannenkijkers* (‘rhetoricians, heavy drinkers’), invented at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and which was intended to criticize them, and made it their own in a self-deprecating way. Van Bruaene & Van Bouchante (2017, 25-29) favour a new interpretation of the bourgeois morality, which was hitherto described as being largely based on the measure and reason of Protestant morality. However, to focus solely on this moralistic dimension restricts our understanding of the *burgermoraal* (‘Dutch bourgeois, middle-class morality’), where humour also played an important role.

It is our opinion that Jan Miense Molenaer’s view is strongly linked to this satirical and self-parodying dimension of *Rederijker* culture. In *Sight*, the painter depicts two figures who do not appear to be peasants but may belong to the middle class. The man may even be a rhetorician or *Rederijker*. They are depicted

as *kannenkijkers* ('jug watchers'), which indicates that, although they do not yet appear to be excessively drunk, they are not drinking in moderation. There is a certain solidarity between the two characters who are united in the same action and look in the same direction. Thus, it seems that Jan Miense Molenaer may be satirizing the *Rederijkers*, *kannenkijkers* ('rhetoricians, heavy drinkers') and could even be self-parodying (Van Bruaene & Bouchante 2017).

*Hearing* shows some degradation, as evidenced by the less sophisticated outfits of the characters and the hole in the elbow of the protagonist's tunic. Moreover, the protagonist's attitude suggests a rather convivial drunkenness, with songs or poems and a certain gaiety, such as one might find at gatherings of the *Rederijkerskamers* ('chambers of rhetoric'). There is a kind of tension between rurality (the outfit) and urbanity (the convivial attitude).

The protagonist is holding a tankard in his hand, but without looking at it intensely or emptying it greedily, which may suggest a certain moderation in his drinking behaviour. In addition, on the barrel, we note the presence of a white cockerel, the emblem of a famous Amsterdam brewery called *De Witte Haan* ('the white rooster'), founded in 1611 by Pieter Dircksz Hasselaer of Haarlem (1554-1616) (Van Suchtelen & Buvelot 2016, 169). The latter was also a member of the Amsterdam council and one of the administrators of the *VOC* or *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* ('Dutch East India Company'), which gave him social standing. It was extremely common for brewers to be men of power, and for breweries to be very valuable socio-economic spaces for cities. Indeed, the excise duty on beer constituted a very large part of the city of Amsterdam's revenue (Van der Molen 2020). Consequently, one of our first hypotheses is that Jan Miense Molenaer referred to this brewery, which was highly recognized in Amsterdam, to signal his integration or at least his desire to integrate into the city life of Amsterdam, to which he had just moved. Another hypothesis would be that the white cockerel is a spatial cue situating the tavern in which the characters of *Hearing* evolve in an urban and not a rural space. Thus, the merry men in the painting are not laughing peasants but members of the middle class, declaiming texts or songs that are probably rhetorical. However, these hypotheses need to be carefully considered, as the presence of the tankard could simply be a scenographic accessory indicating that the scene takes place in a tavern.

Earlier, we noted a break between *Hearing* and *Taste*. Indeed, the two protagonists are in the same position, not following the rhythmic oscillation that is present between the other paintings. Moreover, there seems to be a variation in the behaviour of the characters, who are no longer united by a certain conviviality, unlike in the previous panel. They are focused on their own activity, not caring at all about the world around them. Similarly, the presence of the dagger adds a certain violence to the scene that was previously absent. Although

we may be tempted to conclude that Jan Miense Molenaer is no longer depicting *Rederijkers* ('members of the chambers of rhetoric'), but rather rough peasants who fit all the clichés of *burger* or bourgeois society, there is a clue that casts doubt on the apparent dichotomy in the construction of the series: the extravagant red hat with fur trim hanging on the back of the drinker's chair. This does not seem to belong to the peasants' repertoire of clothing, but rather to that of the middle class and of the literary guilds or chambers of rhetoric. Indeed, we see this hat again and again in Jan Steen's<sup>7</sup> merry companies of bourgeois families and *Rederijkers* ('members of the chambers of rhetoric'). Most of his family scenes are organized around a popular proverb that has been rethought and dramatized by rhetorical literature, such as *soo voer gesongen, soo na gepepen* ('as the old sing, so pipe the young') (Heppner 1939/1940, 31). In this painting, we see a young boy at the top right playing the bagpipes, an instrument that is considered extremely vulgar, wearing the same hat as the one on the back of Jan Miense Molenaer's chair in *Taste*. It can also be seen on the head of a young flutist in the *Rijksmuseum* version. In addition, the same headgear is depicted in another painting by Jan Steen, which is explicitly related to the *Rederijkers*, as it is entitled *The rhetoricians*. This 1655 painting shows a geminated window as the setting for a gathering of *Rederijkers* ('members of the chambers of rhetoric'). The awkwardly tied curtain gives the scene a theatrical look, and the *blazoen* ('blazon or coat of arms') indicates that we are indeed looking at a *Rederijkerskamer* ('chamber of rhetoric'). Each chamber of rhetoric had a diamond-shaped coat of arms with its emblem and motto. The *blazoen* ('blazon or coat of arms') is part of the visual vocabulary of the *Rederijkers* ('members of the chambers of rhetoric'), as are the open window and the grape leaf – a reference to Bacchus and the bacchanal (Van Bruaene & Van Bouchante 2017, 10-15). The latter motif is missing from the 1655 painting, but we can easily understand the theme of the painting. Here, our interest lies in the figure on the right, leaning nonchalantly on the windowsill with a tankard in his hand. He is again wearing the same style of hat as the drinker in Jan Miense Molenaer's *Taste*, although the fur brim is less voluminous. There is a great deal of theatricality in the works by Jan Steen we have mentioned; the headgear seems to be more of a stage prop than a daily life prop. Thus, by using this type of accessory, Jan Miense Molenaer reinforces the artificiality of the scene he is depicting. There is, however, a major difference between the work of Jan Steen and that of Jan Miense Molenaer. The protagonist in *Taste* does not wear the hat, it hangs on the back of the chair and is only secondary in the composition. As a consequence, the protagonist appears to have abandoned his function as either a rhetorician or a comedian, to take on that of a vulgar drinker instead. With

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<sup>7</sup> Jan Havickszoon Steen (1626 - 1679) was a leading Dutch genre painter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

the hat and how it is positioned, the painter brings about a kind of transition, passing from one milieu, the bourgeois *Rederijkerskamer* ('chamber of rhetoric'), to another, the lowlier tavern. As Pieter Biesboer points out, Jan Miense Molenaer is a master storyteller.<sup>8</sup>

The last two paintings in the series seem to focus more on a satire of peasant society. Indeed, they take up iconographic codes based on clichés developed by the middle class, which seek to mock the vulgarity of the peasants' backward way of life.

In *Smell*, the main activity is a highly recurrent motif in peasant imagery, as evidenced by the works of Adriaen Brouwer and Adriaen van Ostade, among others. The reactions to the stench of the child's bottom are a comic element that is highly appreciated by the bourgeois clientele. It is not to be assumed that the audience would have been shocked by such images, since they invented them. Moreover, according to Schiller (2007, 78), this outrageous behaviour does not seem to have any real moral or didactic significance, in the sense that an educated viewer would never behave in this way, so it seems difficult to believe that the painting was used for moralizing purposes. It is therefore highly likely that the main purpose of this work is to provoke laughter by making fun of the disgusting and crude activities of these peasants, so that bourgeois spectators could enjoy the images and laugh at them without the moral consequences (Westermann 1997c, 73-74). Thus, the fetid smell of the boy's backside and the peasant's overreaction in plugging his nose are catalysts for laughter.

Another comic motif appears in the last painting, where the wife is beating her husband: this is a recurrent theme in the comic literature of the *Rederijkers* ('rhetoricians; members of literary guilds') and in the iconographic vocabulary of peasant scenes. Schama (1988, 401) indicates that the character of the *Dulle Griet* ('Dull Gret; or Mad Meg') is regularly associated with the sense of touch. The *Dulle Griet* ('Dull Gret; or Mad Meg') refers to a woman who behaves in a greedy, vicious, lustful, and excessive way, contrary to the expectations of seventeenth-century society. The feminine ideal of the time was based on virtue and uprightness. A woman must remain in her place and fully fulfil her role as daughter, then wife, and finally mother. Strength and brutality are traits reserved for men, and the social definition of what is normal for women is constructed in opposition to what is normal for men. The woman in Jan Miense Molenaer's painting violates society's expectations (Salomon 2004, 98), placed as she is, by the artist in a position of dominance over her husband. Reversed gender roles were a popular comic motif in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It should be noted that the man's

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<sup>8</sup> Pieter Biesboer, email to author, March 22, 2022. Pieter Biesboer is a Dutch art historian, specializing in 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch art.

lewd behaviour is also contrary to the purity and virtue sought in an honorable mercantile relationship.

These different observations lead us to believe that there are several social categories that cohabit within the series. One of our main hypotheses is that there is a kind of social degradation as the series progresses, linked to the sensory hierarchy. Jan Miense Molenaer staged this alteration using lighting effects, attitudes, and props as if he were a dramatist.

The first two panels present, in our opinion, two middle-class scenes corresponding to the idealized morality and lifestyle of the *Rederijkers* ('rhetoricians; members of literary guilds') or at least of members of the middle class. Then *Taste* occupies a pivotal position linked to the ambiguity of the protagonists. Finally, there is *Smell* and *Touch*, which seem to refer explicitly to the peasantry. Jan Miense Molenaer parodies the traditional hierarchy of the senses to reflect differences in social standing. By creating a split between the higher and lower senses, he associates the first two with the urban middle class, while associating the last three with a more modest or even peasant class living in the countryside.

This possible urban/peasant divide within the series appears to somewhat contradict our earlier thinking. The central panel, i.e., *Taste*, could then pose a problem, as it does not seem to fit neatly in these dichotomous dynamics. But we may be able to explain the contradiction away. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, there were *Rederijkerskamers* ('chambers of rhetoric') in most towns and villages in the Netherlands (Gibson 1981, 427-428), while major urban centres, such as Amsterdam or Leiden, were home to several *Rederijkerskamers* ('chambers of rhetoric'). The literary guilds had considerable influence over the functioning of society at both the local and the national level. Presumably, however, the *Rederijkerskamers* ('chambers of rhetoric'), situated in the smaller towns and villages, were seen as less important or prestigious than those in the major cities. The protagonists of *Taste* could be *Rederijkers* ('rhetoricians') from these secondary and rural chambers of rhetoric, which were also subject to a certain marginalization in the minds of the inhabitants of the big cities. It should be borne in mind that Jan Miense Molenaer had just moved to Amsterdam, one of the major urban centres of the United Provinces, and hence it is not surprising that he would place the city in a position of superiority over secondary urban spaces. We feel that the presence of the logo of the *De Witte Haan* brewery should therefore be read as a spatial marker for the first two paintings. In contrast, the last two paintings are set in peasant taverns, where marginal and less evolved characters are mocked by urban society.

This would also mean that there are two kinds of taverns: good ones and bad ones. As Van Bruaene and Van Bouchante (2017, 15-19) point out, historical

studies of alcohol consumption in the early modern era have shown that contemporaries made a distinction between the two spaces. This social construction was taken up in seventeenth-century Dutch literature and painting. The good tavern was an indispensable social space in the city for middle-class men and had a direct professional function. It was an essential space where sellers and buyers drew up contracts, where guild masters hired new companions, where certain conflicts were resolved, etc. Drunkenness was tolerated or even encouraged if it remained within reasonable limits, and men offered drinks to their friends and guild brothers to show their affluence and to foster conviviality. Bad taverns, on the other hand, were situated outside the walls of the town or village, and were beyond the control of the tax collectors, and were places of debauchery where prostitution and drunkenness were rampant. The *Rederijkers* ('rhetoricians') and other members of the urban middle class associated themselves with the civilized space of the good tavern and preferred to distance themselves from the vulgarity of the bad tavern, which was mostly frequented by peasants and people with low social standing. In fact, for their literary activities, the *Rederijkers* ('rhetoricians') preferred to patronize establishments, which often had strict rules prohibiting excessive drinking, shouting, and fighting. Van Bruaene and Van Bouchante (2017) make it clear, however, that there was often a wide gap between theory and practice, and that it was not uncommon for *Rederijkers'* banquets to dissolve into drinkfests. Thus, on closer inspection, the *Rederijkerskamer* ('chamber of rhetoric') and the tavern were hardly separate social spaces. The construction of the *topoi* of the good and bad tavern is partly explained by the fact that the *Rederijkers* ('rhetoricians') were aware of the strong similarities between their rooms and the taverns. Thus, they equated their social spaces with the 'good' taverns, while demonizing the 'bad' ones by linking them to excess, dirtiness, and rurality. Our hypothesis is that Jan Miense Molenaer represents both taverns in his series: the good one for the higher senses and the bad one for the lower senses. *Taste* would mark the tipping point between the two spaces.

The gradation of light, mentioned earlier, also appears to support this theory. The series starts with the artificiality of *chiaroscuro* ('strong contrast between light and dark'), and then the scenes become lighter and lighter until they reach full natural light due to the large opening in the background. The artificiality and darkness of the first two paintings could refer to the modernity and darkness of urban interiors, while the increasingly bright lighting could refer to the naturalness of the countryside. If so, we are not confronted with characters from the same social category only, but it seems that Jan Miense Molenaer also played with the two spaces and the hierarchy of meanings to create a complex satirical tale showing the degradation of man, as he abandons himself to excesses.

This rhetorical and satirical mechanism may have had a moralizing aim; nevertheless, the main thrust of the series seems to us to be primarily comical. Indeed, we hold that Jan Miense Molenaer sought to entertain his new Amsterdam audience with a humorous tale in the guise of a real comedy play.

## 5. Jan Miense Molenaer, rhyparographer

Molenaer's series is not just a series of comical paintings. There is a real reflection on the subject matter. The painter's conceptual as well as plastic application give him the status of a rhyparographer (Falkenburg 1995, 197). Sterling (1952) first suggested that *Renaissance*-painters tried to revive an ancient art form that Pliny called rhyparography, and which he defined as the painting of humble objects in opposition to that of mythological, historical, or religious subjects. The term later took on a pejorative dimension, when it became used to designate the painting of vulgar and sordid subjects, such as the comical treatment of the five senses in the *Mauritshuis* series.

Jan Miense Molenaer is a director who structures not only each individual scene to create disorder, but also the whole of the scenes in relation to each other to create a complex tale based on sensory hierarchy. He places mundane things and activities at the center of the viewer's attention, representing them with meticulous detail. This is evidenced by the careful rendering of the protagonists' costumes, the precision of the facial features and colours, and the hairiness. The objects depicted, although humble, are treated with care, as can be seen from the reflections left, by the subdued lighting of the oil lamp, on the jug of *Sight*, the presence of the emblem of the *De Witte Haan* brewery on the barrel of the beer mug in *Hearing*, the intricate complexity of the fur hat on the equally complex back of the chair in *Taste*, the dirt on the child's bottom in *Smell*, and the sophistication of the vulgar drapery and degraded clothing in *Touch*. In this manner, the painter praises banality and vulgarity throughout the series, creating a paradoxical praise or "paradoxical encomium" (Falkenburg 1995). This rhetorical figure is rendered through plastic and compositional application, allowing the artist to give artistic importance to familiar and even crude motifs, thus achieving a *schilderachtig*<sup>9</sup> ('picturesque') framework. The process tends to infuse the work moreover with a comical dimension, as banal and vulgar objects become precious.

The rhyparographic processes of the series are not only to be found in its plastic and iconographic treatment, but also in the details that give access to another level of reading. Jan Miense Molenaer sprinkled these elements of meaning throughout his work though only an attentive or knowledgeable

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<sup>9</sup> Literally 'picturable' later translated as 'picturesque,' a notion developed by Reindert Falkenburg in his lecture, *Painting Bad, Rhyparographer*, given at Paris Panthéon-Sorbonne on April 11, 2022.



audience will notice them: they add to the paradox of the scenes, alluding to expressions and comments that go beyond the material framework of the tavern.

*Sight*, which at first glance appears to be a straightforward *chiaroscuro* work depicting two *kannenkijkers* ('jug watchers'; 'heavy drinkers') while simply contrasting dark and light, contains details offering another level of reading. De Jongh (1995, 40-43), for example, hints at the possible sexual nature of the jug and the flame. He argues that the jug can be a uterine symbol and shows that this interpretation is grounded in a long tradition: the iconography of Lucretius' assault, where one can regularly find an overturned jug or pot. De Jongh (1995) adds that the flame of the candle can be a phallic symbol, as this type of vulgar metaphor was highly valued by seventeenth-century painters. Thus, if De Jongh's (1995) interpretation is correct, Jan Miense Molenaer would have added a sexual dimension to a painting that seems, at first glance, to be completely devoid of it. The jug is plastically inscribed on the woman, while the flame is on the man. Although the two do not merge, it is through the glow of the candle that the opening of the jug is made visible and is intensely looked at by the libidinous man, no sexual action is initiated, but this scene could foreshadow that of *Touch*.

Jan Miense Molenaer may also have introduced a semantic complexity in the second painting, through the white rooster, the trademark of the famous Amsterdam brewery, *De Witte Haan*, which places the series in a certain geographical and temporal reality. However, for Pieter Biesboer,<sup>10</sup> the choice of this brewery was no accident, in the sense that Jan Miense Molenaer was a master of the art of *double entendre* ('artistic devise leading to a double meaning'). It may be that Molenaer used the brand name to refer to a metaphor that was well known at the time: the image of the white cockerel was used to represent an arrogant man, who plays innocent.

Moreover, the bird also symbolizes the absence of chastity, as evidenced by its presence in the centre of Bruegel's composition *Luxuria* (De Jongh 1995, 28). This element could give a clue as to the nature of the protagonist's singing or it could be a kind of revelation of his obscene thoughts. The white tea towel hanging from the back of the chair contributes to the irony and ambivalence of the scene, since white refers to innocence and chastity, which is diametrically opposed to what the rooster conveys.

Finally, since the beginning of our study, we have referred to the theatricality of the *Mauritshuis* series. Jan Miense Molenaer structures the disorder, uses characters, settings and even costumes from the theatre, such as the red hat with fur trim. But that is not the only headgear from the rhetorical repertoire. In fact, there is a character with a hat with two feathers in every

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<sup>10</sup> Pieter Biesboer, in an email to us, dated March 22, 2022.

painting, except in *Smell*, where we cannot see the headgear of the third character. The same type of hat is regularly found in Jan Steen's works depicting rhetoricians. According to Heppner (1939-1940, 33), it is a costume for the jester in the *Rederijkerskamers* ('chambers of rhetoric'), and the feathers belong to a cock. Thus, the fact that in almost all of Molenaer's paintings one of the secondary characters is wearing the cocked hat of the jester, allows us to conclude that the series is inscribed in a total comical theatricality (Westermann 1997a, 381-382). Similarly, the spectator figure in each panel can be interpreted as referring to the figure of the fool in Dutch festive imagination: a character who breaks the fourth wall (Cloutier-Blizzard 2013) and invites the audience to laugh at the situation, encouraging and legitimizing their amusement.

## 6. Conclusion

In this series, the painter becomes a director and storyteller, not only through the details and scenarios present in each canvas, but also through the connections he makes from one canvas to the next. Thus, *Hearing* is announced in *Sight*, as evidenced by the presence of a bird on the jug; then the pitcher of *Hearing* announces the central subject of *Taste*; the smoking kit of *Taste* appears in the next panel and finally the carnal dimension of *Touch* is suggested by the bare buttocks of the child in *Smell*.

Jan Miense Molenaer is a true pictorial dramatist. The abundance of details, the application of the plastic treatment, the references to popular proverbs, the paradoxical praise and the satirical plurality allow him to create a work that is funny and meets the expectations of the *burgermoraal* ('Dutch bourgeois or middle-class morality'). The latter sought to be entertained by coarse and outrageous subjects, such as those present in the 1637 series, in a Protestant society where austerity and moderation were the ideal.

It follows that Jan Miense Molenaer's *Five senses* is not just a series of vulgar scenes that serve as moral support and entertainment for the bourgeoisie. It is a complex work characterized by the presence of a great deal of humour, which could only exist through puns and innuendo in Dutch seventeenth-century society, given the political and religious circumstances prevailing in the Republic of the United Provinces. The painter uses this series not only to please his contemporaries, but also to parody the classical iconography of the senses and to satirize society. Thus, Jan Miense Molenaer not only depicts vulgar peasants but also *Rederijkers* ('members of the chambers of rhetoric'), and links social degradation to the Aristotelian hierarchy of the senses. Finally, every detail carries meaning and allows the artist to create a complex and comic work that only an attentive audience can fully appreciate.

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Agathe Aranda holds a master's degree in art history research from the *Université Paris Panthéon Sorbonne* (Paris, France) and specializes in Dutch art of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Under the supervision of Michel Weemans, she has carried out research into Dutch and Flemish comic painting. After completing a first-year dissertation on the theme of *The five senses in the work of Jan Miense Molenaer: allegory, parody, satire*, she wrote a dissertation on *The monkey as a figure of parergon in Dutch and Flemish paintings of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries*. She also spent six months as a researcher at Leiden University (Leiden, The Netherlands).

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### **Les cinq sens dans l'œuvre de Jan Miense Molenaer : parodie, satire et rhyparographie**

La série des *Cinq sens* de Jan Miense Molenaer, conservée au *Mauritshuis*, est composée de cinq petites huiles sur bois traitant chacune d'un des cinq sens. Ces derniers ne sont pas incarnés par des figures allégoriques, mais ressentis par des groupes de personnages banals voire vulgaires. Le peintre parodie un motif traditionnel en le transférant vers un registre comique s'appuyant sur une esthétique humble. Ce renversement humoristique est complété par un esprit satirique qui reflète toute la complexité de la pensée et des attentes de la société mercantile des Provinces Unies. Jan Miense Molenaer se place en rhyparographe en cherchant à faire l'éloge de la trivialité par l'usage de détails plastiques et de références littéraires. Ainsi, les cinq sens sont non seulement utilisés pour divertir le public mais également pour jouer avec les catégories sociales de l'époque, de la classe moyenne à la classe paysanne, et tout cela en suivant la rythmique imposée par la hiérarchie aristotélicienne.

### **De vijf zintuigen in het werk van Jan Miense Molenaer: parodie, satire en rhyparografie**

De serie *De vijf zintuigen* van Jan Miense Molenaer in het Mauritshuis bestaat uit vijf kleine olieverfschilderijtjes die elk een van de vijf zintuigen behandelen. Deze worden niet belichaamd door allegorische figuren, maar ervaren door groepen banale, zelfs vulgaire personages. De schilder parodieert een traditioneel motief door het over te brengen naar een komisch register gebaseerd op een nederige esthetiek. Deze humoristische omkering wordt aangevuld met een satirische geest die de complexiteit van het denken en de verwachtingen in de mercantiele maatschappij van de Verenigde Provinciën weerspiegelt. Jan Miense Molenaer positioneert zichzelf als een rhyparograaf, die trivialiteit wil prijzen door het gebruik van plastische details en literaire verwijzingen. Op deze manier worden de vijf zintuigen niet alleen gebruikt om het publiek te vermaken, maar ook om te spelen met de sociale categorieën van die tijd, van de middenklasse tot de boer, allemaal volgens het ritme dat wordt opgelegd door de Aristotelische hiërarchie.

