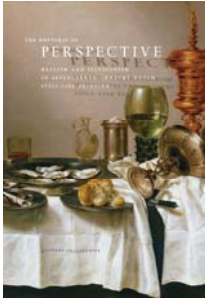


The Rhetoric of Perspective: Realism and Illusionism in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Still-Life Painting / Hanneke Grootenboer.--Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, May 2005.--280 p.: ill.--ISBN 0-226-30968-1 (cl., alk. paper): \$35.00



The “problem of still life,” that genre marginalized in our writing and looking, may well come from what the pictures lack: depth, narrative, and meaning. In her mostly unaltered dissertation from the University of Rochester, Hanneke Grootenboer takes on the “problem,” and so answers Norman Bryson’s plea for apt critical discourse on the genre of still life in his 1990 *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press). A fresh turn with the thoughts and methods of Heidegger, Pascal, Barthes, Lacan, and Merleau-Ponty enables the author to demonstrate new phenomenological interest in the shallow spaces of Dutch Golden Age *trompe l’œil* and breakfast pieces. Extending their ideas with her own clear philosophical questioning and reasoning, along with a command of critical theory, grounded in honest looking at “structured emptiness,” she discovers a new mode of perception works by Pieter Claesz. and Cornelius Gijsbrechts demand, and presents new paths of thinking about them.

Grootenboer looks at the empty backgrounds invented by Pieter Claesz from around 1630 and asks what the void stands for. Does a beige background “represent nothing at all, or does it signify nothingness as such?” How is pictorial truth related to realism, and realism to optical deception? Introducing the effect of anamorphism (think of the skull in Holbein’s *Ambassadors*) Grootenboer argues that a forced awareness of perspective unveils the “naturalized” function, seldom acknowledged, of linear perspective. Representation itself, then, becomes the subject matter of these Dutch pictures. She then explores and applies the concept of allegory in *vanitas* pictures and in writing, as a type of “truth”—namely “a mode of emerging,” not unlike what Martin Luther declared “not being, but becoming.” That perceptual state, polarized and activated by painting using “Baroque perspective,” “in opposition to the pictorial regime of the Renaissance,” offers the “truth of a variation, in another kind of ‘thinking.’” *Trompe l’œil* demonstrates that it “may come close to a revelation of truth precisely because it is in the moment of deceit that our perception fails.” In the breakfast pieces’ less dramatic “picturing of nothingness,” deprived of human gaze, the “truth in painting can be found.”

By guiding us to an awareness of how a breakfast piece and *trompe l’œil* can cause us to see, Grootenboer provocatively extends Michael Ann Holly’s examination of the presumptions of Albertian perspective for history-writing, reconsidering the influence of Panofsky’s powerful notion of perspective as symbolic form. Tightly focused and yet broadly significant, *The Rhetoric of Perspective* represents a bold act of “historiographic experimentation” called for in Holly’s *Past Looking* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996). No less, Grootenboer’s “rhetorical” method of investigation appears completely compatible with “historical and formalist” approaches to Dutch art. Four chapters proceed in logical and visual progression, with close readings of particular paintings, and build almost symphonically to expose how our unwitting assumptions about the rhetoric of perspective are particularly unsuited for appreciating still life. Still-life painting can show us “the emptiness of perspective’s rhetorical paradigm.” That understanding of perspective, given visibility by these pictures, “is a method, not of representation, but of visual argumentation.”

Admirably, the book enacts some of the very traits of its subject—moderation, modesty, and restraint—about specific images that in turn generate a persuasive clarity about greater ideas. Grootenboer advances, in a sterling exposition, the worthy project of understanding the genre of still life. Dissertations, regrettably, may be sometimes overlooked in collection development, but the University of Chicago Press has produced a book respectable in every detail. Its value for museum and graduate level libraries will be averred by readers again and again.

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