

## **The Currencies of Naturalism in Dutch *Pronk* Still-Life Painting: Luxury, Craft, Envisioned Affluence**

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Article abstract

En tant que mode de représentation, le naturalisme des natures mortes ostentatoires néerlandaises du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle suscite un désir consumériste. Pourtant, comme le mot l'indique, le naturalisme vise la représentation d'objets, de figures, et d'espaces d'une manière qui imite la réalité. Comment les *pronkstillevens* peuvent-elles prétendre à la vérité de la représentation naturaliste en même temps qu'elles incarnent le luxe, une forme de plaisir personnel déterminé par la valeur sociale ? Pour répondre à cette question, cet essai poursuit trois pistes de réflexion : le statut de la représentation naturaliste comme produit de luxe, les tensions entre l'artisanat et le travail dans ces tableaux, et enfin les distinctions entre l'abondance et l'affluence codifiée dans le naturalisme néerlandais.

# The Currencies of Naturalism in Dutch *Pronk* Still-Life Painting: Luxury, Craft, Envisioned Affluence

Miya Tokumitsu

En tant que mode de représentation, le naturalisme des natures mortes ostentatoires néerlandaises du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle suscite un désir consumériste. Pourtant, comme le mot l'indique, le naturalisme vise la représentation d'objets, de figures, et d'espaces d'une manière qui imite la réalité. Comment les *pronkstillieven* peuvent-elles prétendre à la vérité de la représentation naturaliste en même temps qu'elles incarnent le luxe, une forme de plaisir personnel déterminé par la valeur sociale? Pour répondre à cette question, cet essai poursuit trois pistes de réflexion: le statut de la représentation naturaliste comme produit de luxe, les tensions entre l'artisanat et le travail dans ces tableaux, et enfin les distinctions entre l'abondance et l'affluence codifiée dans le naturalisme néerlandais.

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1. Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago, 1983), 122; Hanneke Grootenboer, *The Rhetoric of Perspective: Realism and Illusionism in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Still Life Painting* (Chicago, 2005), 4–5.

2. Julie Hochstrasser, "Stilstaende dingen: Picturing Objects in the Dutch Golden Age," in *Early Modern Things: Objects and Their Histories, 1500–1800*, ed. Paula Findlen (London, 2013), 107.

3. Even the recent literature is vast. A brief list of recent scholarship addressing materiality in early modern art includes Christy

Windows, mirrors, maps: The surfaces of naturalistic paintings continuously invite comparisons to other representational planes, particularly those that connote a heightened level of informational value, and suggest—or even claim outright—that the pictures in question can reveal truths beyond what the eye alone can observe.<sup>1</sup> In the case of the Dutch *pronk* (or “show”<sup>2</sup>) still-life paintings of the seventeenth century, the insinuation of value-laden information imbued these paintings with material and social qualities that approached, and sometimes eclipsed, those of the rare and costly items depicted. As this study suggests, profuse naturalistic detail loaded these works with a visual excess meant to appeal to spectators informed by new methods of natural inquiry, keenly attuned to technical craftsmanship, and inclined to the thrall of visualizing economic affluence. As a representational mode, the naturalism manifested in *pronkstillieven* was itself a luxury commodity invested with a social capital that exceeded even the value of the painter’s skill, materials, and labour.

This focus on new ways of knowing, materiality, and trade networks provides a ready platform for discussing the crafted surfaces of naturalistic paintings and their commodity status.<sup>3</sup> These lines of inquiry also allow us to revisit previous scholarship and consider whether there are new conclusions to be drawn from it. For instance, in her seminal text, *The Art of Describing*, Svetlana Alpers asserts the importance of craft and making to naturalistic depiction; as a result of the current interest in materiality, such inquiry has gained new life.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, recent scholarship on the economies of art and knowledge in the early modern world confirms the enduring relevance of earlier socio-economic studies of art.<sup>5</sup> Finally, questions about the *substance* (or lack thereof) behind *pronkstillieven* have concerned a diverse array of thinkers, most notably, Hal Foster, Norman Bryson, and Joanna Woodall.<sup>6</sup> Might these scenes be “mere” projections? Woodall’s challenge to take at face value the virtual nature of these pictures clarifies their place in broader discourses of displaying wealth in the Dutch Republic, which, I suggest, also rely on tropes of miraculous appearance and immaterial projection.<sup>7</sup>

While acknowledging the value of these debates, I argue instead that *pronkstillieven* embodied and communicated their covalent values as commercial luxury objects, as products of human labour, and as signifiers of worldly affluence. As there is nothing inherent in commodities that accounts for their valuation, affirming the social roles of the commodity demands constant interpretation

Anderson, Anne Dunlop, and Pamela H. Smith, eds., *The Matter of Art: Materials, Practices, Cultural Logics, c. 1250–1750* (Manchester, 2015), and Ann-Sophie Lehmann, Frits Scholten, and H. Perry Chapman, eds., *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek 62* (2012), a special issue entitled, “Meaning in Materials: Netherlandish Art 1400–1800.” On Dutch art and trade networks, see Julie Hochstrasser, *Still Life and Trade in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven, CT, 2007); and see Benjamin Schmidt, *Inventing Exoticism: Geography, Globalism, and Europe’s Early Modern World* (Philadelphia, 2015) on global trade and early modern material culture.

4. See Angela Vanhaelen and Bronwen Wilson, “The Erotics of Looking: Materiality, Solicitation and Netherlandish Visual Culture,” in *The Erotics of Looking: Early Modern Netherlandish Art*, ed. Angela Vanhaelen and Bronwen Wilson (Hoboken, 2013); and Nadia Baadj, *Jan van Kessel I (1626–1679): Crafting a Natural History of Art in Early Modern Antwerp* (Turnhout, 2016).

5. 1. Michael Montias, *Artists and Artisans in Delft: A Socio-Economic Study of the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, NJ, 1982) and “Cost and Value in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art,” *Art History* 10, 4 (1987), 454–66.

6. Hal Foster, “The Art of Fetishism: Notes on Dutch Still Life,” in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, ed. Emily Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca, 1993), 251–65; Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (1990; repr. London, 2001); Joanna Woodall, “Laying the Table: The Procedures of Still Life,” in *Erotics of Looking*, ed. Vanhaelen and Wilson, 111–37.

7. Woodall, “Laying the Table,” especially 129–33.

8. Philip Mirowski, “Learning the Meaning of a Dollar: Conservation Principles and the Social Theory of Value in Economic Theory,” *Social Research* 57, 3 (1990), 708.

9. Vanhaelen and Wilson, “Erotics of Looking,” 15.

10. Stephen Perkinson, *The Likeness of the King: A Prehistory of Portraiture in Late Medieval France* (Chicago, 2009), especially 36.

11. Grootenboer, *Rhetoric of Perspective*, 5.

12. *Ibid.*, 47.

13. Perkinson, *Likeness of the King*, 36.

14. Jean Givens, *Observation and Image-Making in Gothic Art* (Cambridge, 2005), 172. Although Givens is focused on an earlier period of European art, her discussion of

on the part of the contemporary observer.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, artworks were essential social objects in a culture—an early modern Republic—that increasingly understood social structure not as decreed from above, but as emerging from the discourse and media that circulated in everyday life.<sup>9</sup> I examine how painterly naturalism in *pronkstilleven* and the labour they entailed were essential to the specific social reception of these works as precious commodities in the Dutch Republic. First and foremost, the painters’ overtures to sensory refinement through their meticulous handling of paint established these paintings as luxury objects in and of themselves. Additionally, in proudly announcing the artisanal labour of the painter and craftsman but eliding the social labour of bureaucracy, transport, and material production that facilitated the existence of these paintings and objects they depicted, painterly naturalism in *pronkstilleven* privileged certain types of labour as more visible than others. Finally, *pronkstilleven* staged visions of affluence within a culture for which outward signs of prosperity served important social functions.

Definitions of naturalism are complex at any point in history—a basic definition of *naturalism* could be that it denotes the qualities of an image or object by which it references the visible world. These references also carry at least some pretence to truth of description. As Stephen Perkinson notes in an important recent study of the issues of representation and naturalism, the first part of this definition is hardly precise or satisfying, for even a crude stick figure references the visible world. Naturalism, then, is partly a matter of degrees.<sup>10</sup> And as for the idea that naturalism contains the pretence of truth, Hanneke Grootenboer rightly points out that “truth in painting” is not a fixed concept even for artists working in a naturalistic mode: for quattrocento Italian painters it meant one thing, for painters of the Dutch Golden Age, it meant another, for photo-realists of the 1960s, yet another.<sup>11</sup> Naturalism is also differentiated from its close relative, illusionism, which departs from mimesis as it simulates rather than imitates reality.<sup>12</sup> As a complex concept then, naturalism cuts across cultures and historical moments: the creation of naturalistic images and the reception of images as naturalistic are built upon specific activities and expectations. These cultural conditions determined which media were used and prompted particular arrays of visual effects that artists emphasized or downplayed in pursuing naturalistic depiction.<sup>13</sup>

In the seventeenth century, Dutch painters applied paint in a way that made it closely resemble the surfaces of other material objects. Their pictures betray an interest in descriptiveness and a dedication to conveying ample visual information.<sup>14</sup> To capture and portray this amount of visual information in paint, these artists had to depart from instinctive methods of observing the world—generalizing, scanning, and selecting—and institute a new kind of inquisitive looking.<sup>15</sup> In doing so, they invited a similarly inquisitive spectatorship, one connected to broader developments in scientific inquiry, that required beholders to observe what, precisely, was before their eyes.<sup>16</sup>

What was before their eyes in these paintings? While *pronkstilleven* often made spatial overtures to the spectators’ physical environment (for instance in the frequent depiction of tables whose edges appear flush with the paintings’ surfaces—where painting and “real world” meet), in these works the descriptive tendencies of Dutch still-life painters are trained toward visualizing luxury



**Figure 1.** Jan Davidsz. de Heem, *Still Life: A Banqueting Scene*, probably ca. 1640–41. Oil on canvas, 135.3 x 185.4 cm. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Charles B. Curtis Fund, 1912 (photo: www.metmuseum.org).

description and naturalism is illuminating and pertinent to this discussion.

15. *Ibid.*, 3.

16. Lorraine Daston, “Observation,” in *Prints and the Pursuit of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe* (New Haven, CT, 2011), 126–33.

17. Representative of Beyeren’s opulent *pronkstilleven* is his composition now in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *Banquet Still Life* of 1667, accession no. M.86.96.

18. H. Perry Chapman, “The Imagined Studios of Rembrandt and Vermeer,” in *Inventions of the Studio, Renaissance to Romanticism*, ed.

—a conceptual “truth” that does not correspond to reality on a one-to-one basis. For one thing, the content of many of these works—a jumbled collection of expensive goods—is fantastical, occasionally to the point of near-preposterousness, as in the case of Abraham van Beyeren’s veritable avalanches of sundries.<sup>17</sup> Other *pronkstilleven* compositions appear to mimic real assemblages that might exist in the context of a painter’s studio. Jan Vermeer, Gerrit Dou, and Jan Steen were notable Dutch painters who depicted artists’ studios stocked with piles of objects frequently represented in still lifes.<sup>18</sup> Yet the studio is itself a staged world of contrivance and props, as Vermeer so famously emphasized in *The Art of Painting*. The sophisticated spectators who could afford or access fine *pronkstilleven* may well have known that the vision before them was a fantasy, but nevertheless delighted in training their focused, connoisseurial vision on the painted confections of sumptuous textures and reflections.

Norman Bryson claimed that *pronkstilleven* by painters like Willem Kalf and Jan Davidsz. de Heem, [fig. 1] which teemed with exotic fruits, metalware, and textiles, in fact presented spectators with “the dream of wealth,”<sup>19</sup> as mesmerizing fantasies of affluence and plenty made beguilingly palpable through naturalistic representation. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe had himself famously pondered whether he would rather own the precious metal vessels in a Kalf painting or the painting itself. In the end, he declared he would prefer the painting.<sup>20</sup> Goethe’s thought experiment emphasizes that these paintings too were meant as objects of desire, potentially more so even

than the sumptuous goods they depict.<sup>21</sup> Although he chooses the painting, Goethe also finds the objects attractive, albeit distinct, which underscores the importance of the distance between object and copy that naturalism depends upon but illusionism suppresses.<sup>22</sup> The naturalism in these works presented spectators with surfaces that not only astonished through demonstrations of painterly skill, but also reproduced and exceeded the spectator's desire for the objects therein. An excessive vision could stoke possessive desire as much as, and sometimes more than, its referents.

### Naturalism as Luxury Commodity

It is well known that finely painted pictures fetched dizzyingly high prices in the Dutch Republic.<sup>23</sup> Within the Dutch art market, paintings by Vermeer and Dou could garner six hundred guilders for their glittering surfaces, while cheap pictures could be had for under ten.<sup>24</sup> Pamela H. Smith underlines that these prices have been a topic of fascination within art historical scholarship;<sup>25</sup> indeed they make tangible the economic value these paintings held for certain members of society. The labour, and therefore the time, required to complete such finely finished works helped drive their prices skyward. Smith notes that Dou and Frans van Mieris the Elder fastidiously tallied the number of hours they spent creating specific paintings.<sup>26</sup> While certainly the skill and labour demanded by naturalistic representation were factors propelling the prices of these paintings upward, the social value invested in painterly naturalism rendered it a special kind of object that circulated within the market: a luxury. For a savvy contemporary audience, naturalistic depiction provided aesthetic refinement and the pleasure of consuming it, qualities that also define the luxury commodity.

The concept of luxury has a long history of evolving connotations, which cannot be recounted in full here.<sup>27</sup> For the purposes of this discussion, I focus on the two "characterizing formal features" of luxury articulated by Christopher Berry in his astute meditation on the topic: refinement and positive pleasure.<sup>28</sup> Both characteristics are rooted in the satisfaction of the senses. Refinement refers to the qualitative or adjectival aspects of goods.<sup>29</sup> Whereas quantity is circumscribed when it comes to pleasing the senses (for instance, as the glutton knows, the stomach can only hold so much food), one can always add another adjective or quality to an existing qualification, and therefore refinement and the increase in satisfaction it provides, is, in principle, limitless.<sup>30</sup> Hence a painting that not merely adorns a wall, but is attractive, displays stimulating subject matter, is finely executed, composed of precious pigments, created by a famous painter, and so on. The second characteristic of luxury, positive pleasure, is defined by Berry as the value that a particular good has in being pleasing in and of itself, not merely dispelling negative sensations, but fostering positive ones.<sup>31</sup> *Pronkstilleven* were luxuries in that their meticulously crafted naturalism invoked reactions of positive, refined pleasure. Indeed, depicting other commodities that bestowed this very same pleasure helped to enhance their own status as luxury objects, for they displayed rare and desirable objects that signalled refinement and exquisite materiality.<sup>32</sup> In the seventeenth century, refinement and pleasure were pertinent not only to the reception of certain works of art, but also, equally, to practices of

Michael Cole and Mary Pardo (Chapel Hill, 2005), 108–146.

19. Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 130.

20. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Zur Erinnerung des Städtisches Kabinetts" [1797], in *Gedenksausgabe der Werke, Briefe und Gespräche*, ed. Ernst Beutler, vol. 13 (Zurich, 1954), 121. In fact, as Sam Segal notes, Goethe was looking at a copy of a Kalf painting. Sam Segal, *A Prosperous Past: The Sumptuous Still Life in the Netherlands 1600–1700*, exh. cat., Stedelijk Museum Het Prinsenhof, Delft (Amsterdam, 1988), 185.

21. Vanhaelen and Wilson argue that the material qualities of seventeenth-century Dutch painting were aimed at capturing viewers' attention via visually seductive address. Vanhaelen and Wilson, "Erotics of Looking," 9–10.

22. Grootenboer, *Rhetoric of Perspective*, 47.

23. Pamela H. Smith, *The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago, 2004), 213. See also Eric J. Sluijter, "Schilders van 'cleyne, subtile ende curieuse dingen.' Leidse 'fijnschilders' in contemporaine bronnen," in *Leidse Fijnschilders: Van Gerrit Dou tot Frans van Mieris de Jonge 1630–1760*, ed. Eric J. Sluijter et al., exh. cat., Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal Leiden (Zwolle, 1988), 26ff.

24. Alpers, *Art of Describing*, 115.

25. Smith, *Body of the Artisan*, Chapter 4, note 91.

26. *Ibid.*, 214; Montias, "Cost and Value."

27. For an overview of this topic, see David Cloutier, *The Vice of Luxury: Economic Excess in a Consumer Age* (Washington, DC, 2015), especially Chapter 1, "Luxury in History: A Brief Survey," 25–54.

28. Christopher Berry, *Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation*, Ideas in Context 30 (Cambridge, 1994), 11–13.

29. Berry's thought on the subject is informed by David Hume's essay, "On Luxury," whose title Hume later changed to "On Refinement in the Arts." Berry, *Idea of Luxury*, 11.

30. Berry, *Idea of Luxury*, 11–13.

31. *Ibid.*, 12–13.

32. Alpers reads the selection of objects and the manner of their representation as stemming from a "concern with craft." Alpers, *Art of Describing*, 115.

33. Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150–1750* (New York, 2001), 308–10.

34. For a thoughtful study on early modern object-based pedagogy, see Claudia Swan, "Making Sense of Medical Collections in Early Modern Holland: The Uses of Wonder," in *Making Knowledge in Early Modern Europe: Practices, Objects, and Texts, 1400–1800*, ed. Pamela H. Smith and Benjamin Schmidt (Chicago, 2007), 199–213.

35. The literature on the early modern study and *studiolo* is vast. Select sources include Dora Thornton, *The Scholar in His Study: Ownership and Experience in Renaissance Italy* (New Haven, 1997); Michael Cole and Mary Pardo, eds., *Inventions of the Studio, Renaissance to Romanticism* (Chapel Hill, 2005); Wolfgang Liebenwein, *Studiolo. Die Entstehung eines Raumtypus und seine Entwicklung bis um 1600* (Berlin, 1977).

36. Grootenboer, *Rhetoric of Perspective*, 5–6.

37. Penelope Gouk, *The Ivory Sundials of Nuremberg 1500–1700* (Cambridge, 1988).

38. Penelope Gouk, "The Union of Arts and Sciences in the Eighteenth Century: Lorenz Spengler (1720–1807), Artistic Turner and Natural Scientist," *Annals of Science* 40, 5 (1983), 421–22.

39. Daston and Park, *Wonders*, 309. On the commercial traffic in *naturalia* see also Paula Findlen, "Inventing Nature: Commerce, Art and Science in the Early Modern Cabinet of Curiosities," in *Merchants and Marvels: Commerce, Science and Art in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Pamela H. Smith and Paula Findlen (New York, 2002), 297–323.

40. Nicholas Barbon, *A Discourse of Trade* (1690, repr. Baltimore, 1903), 14.

41. Smith and Findlen, "Introduction," in *Merchants and Marvels*, 17; Findlen, "Inventing Nature," 299–301. See also Mark Meadow's essay, "Merchants and Marvels: Hans Jacob Fugger and the Origins of the Wunderkammer," in the same volume, about Hans Jacob Fugger and the trade in natural rarities.

42. Daston and Park, *Wonders*, 309.

43. *Ibid.*, 310. François Poullain de la Barre, *De l'éducation des dames pour la conduite de l'esprit dans les sciences et dans les mœurs*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1674), 183.

44. "Scientific ideas and practices had perfectly clear and calculable economic value that could be offered in the market." Smith and Findlen, "Introduction," 17. For

natural inquiry, or pursuing new knowledge about the phenomenal world.<sup>33</sup> Such inquiry was deemed at once a worthy intellectual undertaking and one that offered pleasure and sensuous decadence.

As argued here, naturalistic representation both demanded and gave visual form to the practice of gaining knowledge of the world via close, direct observation. In the seventeenth century, this kind of knowledge was most easily accessible, although not restricted, to members of the elite, astute observers who dwelled in the rarefied worlds of the university,<sup>34</sup> the artist's studio,<sup>35</sup> or the complex visual world of the *Wunderkammer*, surrounded by expensive, specialized tools and the wondrous marvels of these spaces. For all who chose to engage in this kind of inquiry into the powers of observation and analysis, naturalistic representation and the techniques required to achieve it offered both refinement and pleasure. Close looking might involve the use of complex, finely crafted instruments such as the telescope and the microscope—implementations meant to facilitate a fine-grained, intensely focused kind of seeing.<sup>36</sup> These objects themselves were the products of highly specialized craft and were often made from precious materials,<sup>37</sup> a tradition that carried over well into the eighteenth century.<sup>38</sup> The kind of vision facilitated by these instruments was not only refined, it offered moments of delight, yielding astonished wonder in observing the natural world. Indulging the curious passion became a highly refined form of ocular consumerism, mimicking the luxury trade not only in its objects but also through its self-multiplying desire for the ever more rare.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, when Nicholas Barbon commented in his *Discourse of Trade* (1690) that, as the mind of the individual is elevated, "his senses grow more refined, and more capable of Delight," he underscored refinement as central to the physical and intellectual pleasures of natural inquiry. This new environment helps us understand the emergence of *pronkstilleven* as a genre.<sup>40</sup>

Some objects of inquiry such as natural specimens, originally outside the realm of valuation via price and cost in their original states, became captured by the market through their commodification as collectibles, their rarity in nature manifested in high prices yielded by the law of supply and demand.<sup>41</sup> Luxury was perceived as inherent to sincere curiosity in the natural world, but curiosity had the benefit of diminishing the iniquity traditionally associated with sinful *luxuria*; it recast "the private vices of greed and voluptuousness into public virtues of industry and prosperity."<sup>42</sup> In fact, it was proper that scientific inquiry be determined by the caprices of the market; the Cartesian writer François Poullain de la Barre (1647–1725) thought it entirely right that the sciences should change "like fashions."<sup>43</sup> Paula Findlen and Pamela H. Smith have even suggested that abstract ideas could be priced for exchange in early modern Europe.<sup>44</sup> In a mercantile culture that drew more and more things into the marketplace, the aura of scientific expertise embedded in these highly naturalistic images helped inflate the perceived refinement, and hence monetary value, of the paintings.

Seventeenth-century Dutch theorists stressed the importance of meticulous imitation of nature in the arts, and their texts stand apart from other European models of naturalism in their emphasis on deception. Although he discusses history painting in his 1642 text, *Lof der Schilder-konst* (*Praise for the Art of Painting*), Philips Angel declared *na-boosten*, or imitation, specifically the

elision of boundaries between reality and appearance, to be among the painter's highest aims.<sup>45</sup> Samuel van Hoogstraten, whose own art did cross from representation into illusionism, stresses the importance of imitating nature in his *Inleyding tot de hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst* (1678) (*Introduction to the Noble School of Painting*): "perfect painting is like a mirror of nature, in which things that do not exist appear to exist, and which deceives in an allowably diverting and praiseworthy manner."<sup>46</sup> According to Angel and Hoogstraten, painting that betrays fine-grained inspection of the natural world is "praiseworthy" and pleasing, since we can see the painter's astute eye and hand in operation. Although they are theorizing art, their sentiments are similar to Barbon's thoughts on commerce, an arena in which mind and senses stimulate one another, increasing the capacity for delight.

This importance of delight and pleasure brings us back to the question of price. In a commercial society, knowledge is often translated into market value. So it was with naturalistic painting. While such images made seemingly *naer het leven*, or "from life," were inherently valuable due to the technical skill, labour, and observational processes needed to produce them, within a capitalist society like the Dutch Republic, that knowledge and, importantly for the present discussion, the *aesthetic consequences* of that knowledge also become commodified and priced for exchange. The extremely high prices commanded by the so-called *fijnschilders* were not due to their skill and labour alone, but also to the transferred epistemic "value" of the works themselves and the refinements that these values bestowed. In the case of the *pronk* still life, a precious commodity depicting other precious commodities, the sources of value and refinement are multiple and nested.

John Frow, who has written extensively on the commodification of culture, asserts that the commodity represents the accomplishment of three ends: first, it channels the resources of capital into an area of production, expanding the latter to its fullest capacity; second, it diverts the purpose of production away from the particular qualities of the thing being produced and redirects it towards profit; and finally, it converts previously potential common resources into private resources—allocation now occurs according to economic criteria such as the ability to pay rather than moral or civic entitlement.<sup>47</sup> These broad observations are particularly concentrated in the painterly naturalism of *pronkstillevens*. Luxury objects embody an especially intensive privatization process in that they distil disproportionately vast resources (potentially available to the commons) into items for individual ownership.<sup>48</sup> *Pronkstillevens* are remarkable because they simultaneously enact and depict luxury commodification.

We can observe all three of Frow's aims unfolding in one of Kalf's simple compositions, *Still Life with Ewer, Vessels and Pomegranate*. [fig. 2] The capital resources necessary to create the painting (pigments, the animal hair in paintbrushes) and the objects it depicts (metal ore, wine grapes) are converted into items worth vastly more than the sum total of their raw materials and the labour necessary to produce them. This is true even for raw materials such as ultramarine pigment, which required costly and dangerous methods to obtain.<sup>49</sup> Then, the purposes of production are redirected toward profit; the painter paints and the silversmith casts not for the inherent purposes of

instance, new representational techniques in creating models and maps used by entrepreneurs to promote public works plans affected the political-economic undertaking of such projects in the seventeenth century. See Chandra Mukerji, "Cartography, Entrepreneurialism, and Power in the Reign of Louis XIV: The Case of the Canal du Midi," in *Merchants and Marvels*, 248–76.

45. Eric Jan Sluijter, *De lof der schilderkonst. Over schilderijen van Gerrit Dou (1613–1675) en een traktaat van Philips Angel uit 1642, Seven provinciën reeks 7* (Hilversum, 1993), 19–20; Smith, *Body of the Artisan*, 211–12.

46. Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst: Anders de Zichtbaere Wereldt* (1678; repr. Doornspijk, 1969), 24–25. Smith, *Body of the Artisan*, 212. Celeste Brusati emphasizes that Hoogstraten consistently links knowledge to making and experiment, rather than rhetoric. Celeste Brusati, *Artifice and Illusion: The Art and Writing of Samuel van Hoogstraten* (Chicago, 1995), 224. Thijs Weststeijn notes that Hoogstraten takes a positive view of both painting and the visual world itself while acknowledging discourses of moral vanity regarding both in Dutch culture. Thijs Weststeijn, *The Visible World: Samuel van Hoogstraten's Art Theory and the Legitimation of Painting in the Dutch Golden Age*, trans. Beverly Jackson and Lynne Richards (Amsterdam, 2008), 287–95.

47. John Frow, "The Signature: Three Arguments about the Commodity Form," in *Aesthesis and the Economy of Senses*, ed. Helen Grace (Kingswood, 1996), 192–93.

48. Berry, *Idea of Luxury*, 18–19.

49. See Helen Howard's technical analysis of Vermeer's use of various pigments, including ultramarine. Helen Howard, "Vermeer's palette," n.d. *The National Gallery*, [www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/research/meaning-of-making/vermeer-and-technique/vermeers-palette](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/research/meaning-of-making/vermeer-and-technique/vermeers-palette).



50. Bryson notes that the illusionistic still-life painting in ancient Rome emphasized the *natural* abundance, particularly in the subject matter reserved for these works: foodstuffs freely available in nature, such as honeycomb and local fruits. Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 17–59.

51. Christy Anderson, Anne Dunlop, and Pamela H. Smith, "Introduction," in *The Matter of Art: Materials, Practices, Cultural Logics*, c. 1250–1750 (Manchester, 2015), 6, write that, "associations of materials, while culturally specific, might also cut across both distance and time. Throughout the medieval and early modern world, this trade in luxury goods was predicated on the value given to precious materials such as lapis lazuli [the raw material for ultramarine] from Afghanistan or Armenia."

52. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* [1844], trans. Progress Publishers (Moscow, 1977), 67.

53. Montias, "Cost and Value," 460.

creating paintings and ewers, but for the purpose of exchanging these items at a profit. The glass- and metalware, jumbled with other items, announce their status as objects for purchase and possession; Kalf's painting, itself a collectible, does likewise. Finally, the painting and the objects it depicts are emphatically private resources whose raw materials (the paint's mineral pigments, the sunshine and rainwater that nourished the fruit) in nature were once resources more freely available to all.<sup>50</sup> In the case of these paintings, the capture of these resources into private hands began well before paint met canvas—the mere presence of Afghan ultramarine in Amsterdam was already the result of complex human networks based on unequal distribution of other resources.<sup>51</sup>

### Work and Craft

In addition to redoubling the commodification of depicted sundries, painterly naturalism in *pronkstilleven* encoded moral attitudes about the labour that brings commodities into being and circulation in an open marketplace. In their meticulous timekeeping, Dou and Mieris instinctively anticipated Karl Marx's admonition that "the worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates."<sup>52</sup> The time-intensiveness demanded by highly naturalistic painting increased the paintings' prices not merely through man-hours required but also by limiting the number of works a single painter could produce.<sup>53</sup>

In his *vanitas* composition, *Still Life with a Timepiece*, | fig. 3 | Dou made time literally precious in the form of a fine clock. The clock hangs before a niche containing a tobacco pipe and candle, both extinguished. Time, like the expensive instrument that measures it, is dear. Simon Schama argues that



**Figure 2 (facing page, left).** Willem Kalf, *Still Life with Ewer, Vessels, and Pomegranate*, mid-1640s. Oil on canvas, 104.5 × 80.6 cm. Los Angeles, The J. Paul Getty Museum (photo: Digital image courtesy of the Getty's open content program).

**Figure 3 (facing page, right).** Gerrit Dou, *Still Life with Candlestick and a Watch*. Oil on canvas, 43.5 × 35.7 cm. Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen (photo: BPK, Berlin/Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden/Hans-Peter Klut/Art Resource, NY).

time in Dou's painting appears "less a capital asset to be 'well-spent' or 'prudently invested,' but rather as something merely lived through *en route* to the more meaningful timelessness of eternity."<sup>54</sup> The unlit tobacco and candle, two other things that one "burns through," certainly support his interpretation. However, Dou's real-life timekeeping indicates that at least in his own practice, the hours of the day were capital assets, essential to his enterprise, and, like tobacco, candles, and his fastidiously finished paintings, they were for sale. These two perspectives are not mutually exclusive, but complementary. By including the "capital asset" of time in a *vanitas* picture, Dou offered a nuanced moral commentary on the dual nature of time within the context of his society: time is eternal (hence immeasurable), yet during one's time in this world, it is also a finite resource, and not something to be dispensed carelessly.

For painters like Dou and Mieris, time properly spent yielded profits, which in turn indicated personal virtue and favour for salvation; finding honour in trade, they practiced a kind of "virtuous artisanship."<sup>55</sup> Indeed the high prices fetched by naturalistic paintings induced numerous Dutch painters to reject socially exalted court positions: Dou turned down Charles II's offer to serve as court painter in England, while Mieris demurred from a similar offer from the Grand Duke of Tuscany. Another, later Leiden painter, Adriaen van der Werff, made an extraordinary pact with the Elector of the Palatinate, by which rather than moving to court, he remained in the Netherlands, painted for the elector for six months out of the year, and produced for his own enterprise the other six months.<sup>56</sup> In this last negotiation, time is explicitly a finite resource, which the painter intended to allocate as advantageously as possible. The preciousness of Dutch naturalism resulted in part from the scarcity of these works, which were necessitated by the judicious parcelling of the painter's time.

As many observers have remarked, both the manmade objects in these paintings and the paintings themselves are triumphs of craft. The word *craft* appears throughout the scholarship on *pronkstilleven*,<sup>57</sup> and justifiably so, for the paintings showcase products of human craft at their most spectacular in meticulous painterly description. The shimmering surfaces of *pronkstilleven* may even comprise a kind of *paragone*, asserting the primacy of the painter's craft over all others. Svetlana Alpers offered perhaps the best-known argument for this understanding of Dutch painting in *The Art of Describing*:

In their concentration on rendering crafted stuffs—the silks of Ter Borch, the tapestries and spinets of Dou, Metsu, Mieris, even bread in the case of Vermeer—these artists are clearly asserting their prowess as the supreme human craftsmen of all they represent. The tapestry the weaver weaves, the glass the glassblower blows, the tiles of the tile maker, even the baker's bread—all this they can capture and reproduce in paint. The display of virtuosity so often found in Dutch painters is a display of representational craft.<sup>58</sup>

In the case of the *pronkstilleven*, Alpers's remark is compelling. While most early modern artworks announce their makers' technical abilities, the opulence of these paintings was manifest in large part precisely through the painters' assertion of their rare and precious "representational craft."

Still, not everyone claimed the painters were the victors. Melchoir Fokkens, in his *Beschryving der Wijdt-Vermaerde Koop-stadt Amstelredam (Description of the Widely Renowned Mercantile City of Amsterdam)* celebrates one craftsman, Dirk Rijswijk, who made pearl tulips and roses so fine that no painter could match

54. Simon Schama, "Perishable Commodities: Dutch Still-Life Painting and the 'empire of things'," in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London, 1993), 482.

55. Smith, *Body of the Artisan*, 214.

56. *Ibid.*, 213–14.

57. See Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, esp. 110–18, to which much of this discussion responds.

58. Alpers, *Art of Describing*, 114.

their lustre.<sup>59</sup> Across media, artisans in the Dutch Republic strove for daring feats of extraordinary craftsmanship, creating works that allowed for appreciation of their technical artistry, to catch the eyes of a discerning, free-spending clientele. In these endeavours, artisans were also shaping spectatorship habits, encouraging a connoisseurship appreciative of the technical effects they achieved; as asserted above, the new ways of knowing within scientific cultures contributed to these profound shifts in cultural production.

Craft, the *manual* practice of making these works, speaks to their rarity—only a few artisans in the world possessed the technical skill to produce them.<sup>60</sup> The highly crafted nature of these paintings, and the scarcity that ever more meticulous craft cannot help but beget, further confirmed these items as luxuries. This is true whether one understands the social meaning of luxuries as determined by rarity (many consumers desiring the limited stock of virtuoso artisans) or constitutive of it (luxury generates scarcity because of consumers' desire to distinguish themselves by owning something unique and thus pushing producers to create novelties in limited quantities).<sup>61</sup> In the first case, exquisitely surfaced paintings stand as rarities only a few can obtain; in the latter, the desire to distinguish one's good taste leads consumers to seek out unique goods.<sup>62</sup> Artisans quenched this desire by producing increasingly marvellous manifestations of their crafts.

As a category of work, craft implies a certain preciousness of labour, particularly in our own post-industrial age. It refers to activity within the individual or small workshop enterprise (the only existing type of enterprise in the seventeenth century), but the social labour propping up the entire global and local economic apparatus of production and trade that facilitated the existence of such pictures is nowhere visible. The naturalism in the *pronk* still lifes accentuates this difference, for in these works, the presence of the painter's work—his craft—is profuse, whereas much of the other work responsible for these pictures remains largely invisible.

As much as naturalistic depiction can reveal, or claim to reveal, information imperceptible to the eye (as the analogies of windows, mirrors, and maps indicate), it necessarily repeats the blind spots of social perception. What Dutch painterly naturalism obscured are precisely the same processes that capitalism keeps secret. In *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Marx compares the open, exposed realm of the marketplace with the "hidden abode of production, on whose threshold hangs the notice, 'No admittance except on business.' Here we shall see, not only how capital produces, but how capital itself is produced."<sup>63</sup> When he smoked his pipe, the seventeenth-century Dutch citizen would not see the enslaved worker who harvested his tobacco any more than we can see the millions of children who work in today's apparel industry when we reach for an inexpensive shirt on a department store rack. Using this Marxist frame of analysis, it would seem that precisely because these sites of production are out of public view, they are what *pronkstilleven*—not in spite of but *because* of their meticulous attention to surfaces—keep hidden.<sup>64</sup>

For example, the prizes of Eastern voyages were put on display in Dutch wharves and warehouses, the treasure listed in detail in news reports. One 1634 haul included: Malacca pepper, Japanese copper and lacquerware, boxes of pearls and rubies, bales of Persian silks, blue Ming ware, and Ceylonese

59. Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (London, 1987), 302.

60. Montias notes that the availability of artistic skills affects the supply, and hence prices for artworks. Montias, "Cost and Value," 455–56.

61. Berry, *Idea of Luxury*, 32; Nicholas Xenos, *Scarcity and Modernity* (London, 1989), 94–95.

62. Xenos, *Scarcity and Modernity*, 95.

63. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* [1876], trans. Ben Fowkes (London, 1976), 279–80.

64. Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, 2011), 6.

65. Schama, *Embarrassment of Riches*, 346–47.

66. Descartes penned these lines in a letter to his friend Jean Louis Guez de Balzac. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, eds., *Œuvres de Descartes*, 11 vols. (Paris, 1897), vol. 4, *Correspondence*, no. 33, May 15, 1631, 202–04. See also Claudia Swan, “Lost in Translation: Exoticism in Early Modern Holland,” in *The Fascination of Persia: The Persian-European Dialogue in Seventeenth-Century Art and Contemporary Art of Tehran*, ed. Axel Langer (Zurich, 2013), 101.

67. This text is from the broadsheet, *Profile View of Amsterdam*, produced by Claes Jansz. Visscher and Pieter Bast. An impression is housed in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, RP-P-AO-20-22-1. See also Swan, “Lost in Translation,” 102–04.

68. Schama, “Perishable Commodities,” 480.

69. Schama notes that, while the Dutch were wide-ranging travellers, the domestic sphere comprised the bedrock of political morality. Schama, *Embarrassment of Riches*, 386–92.

70. Woodall discusses how the multi-layered meanings of the Dutch word *tafel* (table), and its diminutive *tafelreel*, frame still-life paintings as a “mutable pictorial field in which the horizontal laid table associated primarily with human consumption interacted with the vertical table or *tableau*.” Woodall, “Laying the Table,” 114.

71. Hochstrasser, *Still Life and Trade*, 247.

72. By some estimates, of the million or so sailors who set out with the Dutch East India Company over its 193-year history, one third to one half never returned. Hochstrasser, *Still Life and Trade*, 247.

73. Hochstrasser, *Still Life and Trade*, 248–49; J.L. van Zanden, *The Rise and Decline of Holland's Economy: Merchant Capitalism and the Labour Market* (Manchester, 1993), 171–72. Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude give a detailed overview of Dutch trade within and beyond Europe, and point out that the latter increased, especially in the years 1680–1720, as the *stapelmarkt* within Europe began to contract. Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude, *The First Modern Economy: Success, Failure, and Perseverance of the Dutch Economy, 1500–1815* (Cambridge, 1997), 409–29.

74. Hochstrasser, *Still Life and Trade*, 249.

sugar, among many other wondrous goods. Schama imagines this abundance, in the eyes of the wharf- or warehouse-goer, as presenting a spectacle of plenty manifested without labour, appearing as if by magic.<sup>65</sup> The thrall of these goods derived not merely from their appeal to the spectator's senses, but also from the seemingly miraculous nature of their appearance. René Descartes, who lived in the Low Countries during the 1630s and 1640s, marvelled at the *ease* with which miscellany from around the world could be had in Amsterdam. For him, it was a pleasure “to see the ships that bring us in abundance all that is produced in the Indies and all that is rare in Europe.... What other place in the world could one choose, where all the commodities of life, and all the curiosities that could be desired, could be found as easily as they are here?”<sup>66</sup> A broadsheet celebrating Amsterdam as a node of global trade declares, “everything that is necessary for the maintenance of the body and amusement of the spirit is here so abundant that you could say that God's merciful blessing, the very cornucopia or horn of plenty, is being poured down on us.”<sup>67</sup> In these passages the pleasure of consumerism derives in part from the spectacle of curiosities “poured down” or waiting to be “found.” The facility of procuring these goods stands in direct contrast to the massive but unacknowledged efforts of transporting them.

Global trade brought both wealth and new knowledge to the Netherlands—this portage is explicit in Artus Quellijn's relief sculpture on the west pediment of Amsterdam's Town Hall (now the Royal Palace), depicting personified continents of the world bringing tribute to Maid Amsterdam, as she presides over the personified Rivers IJ and Amstel.<sup>68</sup> Imported goods manifested the traces—and costs—of journeys around the world. These distances, and the capital required to travel them, instilled imports with economic value and fed desire for the rare. *Pronkstilleven* reveal the global reach of the Dutch Republic, but insistently anchor it at home,<sup>69</sup> specifically on the domestic tabletop.<sup>70</sup>

The totality of social labour undergirding the array of dazzling goods in the *pronkstilleven* is almost beyond imagining.<sup>71</sup> It was not only the most egregiously exploited, enslaved workers who shouldered the production of commodity indulgences, but also Dutch sailors and bureaucrats who kept the whole colonial enterprise functioning. In fact, so many Dutch sailors lost their lives at sea and abroad that their deaths may have been a root cause of declining Dutch population in the first half of the eighteenth century, a decline that in turn contributed to the overall stagnation of the Dutch economy, making both the economic and social costs of these exotic luxuries extremely high.<sup>72</sup> In his study of the seventeenth-century Dutch economy, Jan Luiten van Zanden concludes that the undercompensated labour of colonial and local populations, as well as *uncompensated* slave labour, fed the Dutch economy out of proportion. These workforces were unable to sustain or reproduce themselves, and, paired with Dutch population-loss through seafaring, contributed to the Republic's economic and political decline.<sup>73</sup>

These social costs exacted by commodity consumption go unaddressed in still-life paintings; as in the wharves and streets of port cities, objects and commodities seem to appear spontaneously on Dutch tabletops.<sup>74</sup> For Marx, that illusion—the banishment of productive work from visibility—was central

Figure 4. Willem van Aelst, *Still Life with Armour*, ca. 1651. Oil on canvas. Le Mans, Le musée de Tessé (photo: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY).



to the functioning of capitalism. In the *pronkstilleven*, the illusion is repeated via the naturalism that fixes our attention on surface textures of polished silverware and glistening oysters. As visual spectacles, they celebrate the artist's hand and its ability to represent the glorious commodities for purchase in the Dutch Republic. *Pronkstilleven* manifest the above-mentioned references to cornucopia and ease of possession through a kind of painterly naturalism that makes the depicted objects seem present enough to have. The painter's craft is directed toward making objects appear as if they were made for the taking rather than resulting from the broad efforts of social labour.

#### Abundance vs. Affluence

The highly finished surfaces of these works made palpable not just desirable commodities, but also their profusion. Piled up metalware, bowls overflowing with exotic fruits, cascades of rich textiles all have their textures rendered with a matching abundance of meticulous care. If the insistent assertion of craft in naturalistic painting spoke of refinement, it also embodied sheer plenty: the lengths of time and skill required to make such works and the multitude of detail captured in the paintings repeat the depicted flood of consumable

goods. Such excess in both the subject and the manner of its depiction does not establish a disinterested gaze, but a desiring one, such as that articulated by Goethe.<sup>75</sup> This ardently desiring gaze is based on the fact that *pronkstilleven* do not embody abundance in a general sense, but in a specific socio-economic manifestation of abundance: affluence.

Affluence is abundance financialized and privatized. Bryson considers *pronkstilleven* against the depiction of surfeit in Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Battle between Carnival and Lent*. In Bruegel's picture, abundance and scarcity are cyclical and social. Humanity at large undertakes rituals to endure the lean times and banquet during the fat.<sup>76</sup> *Pronkstilleven*, however, present a world in which social cohesion is no longer fixed by these cycles, and in which the individual must invent and construct his social position amid fickle economic flux.<sup>77</sup> Two important themes emerge from this observation. First, in the commercial world of the Dutch Republic, cycles of scarcity and plenty depended less on seasonal rhythms and were increasingly determined by irregular ups and downs of a manmade market.<sup>78</sup> Second, economic flux affects everyone differently, even though the Republic maintained numerous charitable institutions and legal procedures (such as rehabilitative bankruptcy policies) aimed at preserving social order.<sup>79</sup>

A few *pronkstilleven* make bluntly explicit the privatization inherent to affluence. The piles of metalware in Willem van Aelst's *Still Life with Armour*, | fig. 4 | for instance, seem to occupy the space of a vault, where metal tankards, cups, and platters sit, not to facilitate social conviviality at the banqueting table but as stores of wealth.<sup>80</sup> The pieces of costly armour in this pile do likewise, though they also provide a *memento mori*.

*Pronkstilleven* were worth as much as the desire they could inspire in prospective buyers—buyers who dwelled in a new world of affluence, a cornucopia of commodities in city streets, vying for the attention of passers-by. In his tract, Fokkens catalogues the many splendours on offer throughout Amsterdam: on the Nieuwe Brug were booksellers, stationers, and purveyors of nautical instruments including charts and pilots. Elsewhere were chandlers, pastry shops, and haberdashers. On the Warmoestraat, Nuremberg porcelain, Italian majolica, Delft faience, Lyons silk, Spanish taffeta, and brilliantly bleached Haarlem linen were all at consumers' fingertips, waiting to be absorbed into their homes.<sup>81</sup> Paintings were among the goods on offer and many painters made works "on spec," that they could expect to sell within a relatively short time to common buyers.<sup>82</sup> However, the costliest, most finely rendered works circulated primarily among an exclusive coterie of patrons—it was simply too risky a venture to spend untold hours creating a painting worth several hundred guilders without a buyer lined up. The wealthy patron, in turn, could be assured of primary access to a fashionable artist's wares.<sup>83</sup> Thus did the refined naturalism of painters like Dou and Vermeer create and fulfil a consumerist desire that also entailed the extreme privatization of their talents.

For all the anxiety that the Dutch supposedly felt about their affluence and the Calvinist disapproval of worldliness, the discomfort was hardly absolute. As evidenced by Fokkens's text and Quellijn's pediment, there were Dutchmen aplenty who were not bashful about the Republic's role as a global warehouse. In fact, there seems no reason to assume that core groups of Dutch society, from

75. Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 129.

76. *Ibid.*, 99–100, 129.

77. *Ibid.*, 131.

78. Jean Baudrillard echoes this point, noting that commodities are "dominated not by natural ecological laws but by the laws of exchange value." Baudrillard, *Consumer Society*, 26.

79. Schama, *Embarrassment of Riches*, 343–44, 571–76.

80. Long attributed to Willem Kalf, this painting was recently re-attributed to Aelst; see Tanya Paul, James Clifton, et al., eds., *Elegance and Refinement: The Still Life Paintings of Willem van Aelst*, exh. cat., The Museum of Fine Arts (Houston, 2013), 101–04. Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 128–29.

81. Schama, *Embarrassment of Riches*, 301–2.

82. Montias, "Cost and Value," 462.

83. *Ibid.*, 462. Indeed, when Balthasar de Moncoys visited Vermeer's studio, the painter had no paintings of his own to show him. Moncoys's letter is transcribed in Albert Blankert, Rob Ruurs, and Willem L. van de Wetering, *Johannes Vermeer of Delft: Complete Edition of the Paintings*, trans. Gary Schwartz and Hinke Boot-Tuinman (New York, 1978), 147. The original Dutch documents in this volume were translated by N. van de Wetering-Köhler with revisions by R.R. Symonds.

the patriciate to skilled artisans and tradesmen, showed any special propensity to avoid consumption in favour of savings and investment.<sup>84</sup> Far from being useless or pointless, conspicuous consumption, such as that on display in Pieter de Hooch's well-appointed interiors, served an important social role. For the consumer, this kind of consumption is necessary to the maintenance of his or her social status.<sup>85</sup> Conspicuous consumption helped define the contours of Dutch society, serving as a medium for affirming relationships and rank.

The outward projection of affluence, of privately held wealth, speaks to critical recurring themes raised about Dutch culture and Dutch painting. Perhaps most obviously, it recalls Max Weber's famous thesis that under austere Protestantism, devotion to work for its own sake and the material riches work could bestow assuaged anxieties about being among the elect. The orientation toward work was supposedly not so much the result of one's faith in the afterlife, but rather helped constitute it. Hard work and success did not open the path to salvation, they only ever served as signs of it.<sup>86</sup> Weber himself writes, "a religious value was placed on ceaseless, constant, systemic labour in a secular calling as the very highest ascetic path and at the same time, the surest and most visible proof of regeneration and the genuineness of faith."<sup>87</sup> Outward signs of economic success suffused the Republic in abundance, and if it was as signs that they became moral currency, the magically appearing treasure in Amsterdam's wharves might as well have been a phantasmagorical projection. Or, at least, the retinal images created by the heaps of goods had a social role as substantive as their financial role as stores of wealth.

Finally, it is important to re-evaluate the notion that highly naturalistic Dutch still-life painting might likewise be all surface, an intangible projection with no "real" material objects behind it, a familiar theme explored by Roland Barthes and Hal Foster, among others. In fact, the trope dates to early theorists of still-life painting. In his *Groot Schilderboek* (1707), Gerard de Lairesse, although he admired Kalf, faulted still-life painters for choosing arbitrary subjects and failing to provide reasons for their pictures.<sup>88</sup> Centuries later, Barthes wrote, "Still-life painters like Van de Velde or Heda always render matter's most superficial quality: *sheen*."<sup>89</sup> Bryson asserts that Kalf's is "a virtuosity that circles endlessly around a void. Because the copy [i.e., the painting] is allegedly *better* than the original, the point of the original is lost, yet if that is lost, the copy loses its foundation as well."<sup>90</sup> Foster adds, "As a fetishistic projection, the glance-*Glanz* might include a reminder of the very loss that haunts the subject. Certainly still-life seems so marked: a ghost of lack hangs over its very abundance."<sup>91</sup> In an analysis that combines anthropological, Freudian, and Marxist senses of fetishism, Foster suggests that it is in fact the "capitalist gaze of the Dutch subject" that endows the object with luminescence, which in turn unnerves the subject.<sup>92</sup> Also drawn to notions of intangibility, Joanna Woodall, in her reappraisal of this supposed hollowness of Dutch still life painting, ventures that instead of searching for something "substantial" for this art to represent, we might affirm its "virtual character." Taken on their own terms as perceptions or experiences, these pictures can be meaningful even if they do not necessarily correlate to anything real.<sup>93</sup> In particular, Woodall singles out Kalf's glittering tabletop assemblages set off against dark, unarticulated backgrounds as resembling projected images—as she states, "materializations of projected light."<sup>94</sup>

84. Schama, *Embarrassment of Riches*, 298.

85. Berry, *Idea of Luxury*, 30–31.

86. Weeks, *Problem with Work*, 45.

87. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism* [1905]; trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (New York, 2002), 116.

88. Grootenboer, *Rhetoric of Perspective*, 6; Lyckle de Vries, *Gerard de Lairesse: An Artist between Stage and Studio* (Amsterdam, 1998), 119, describes Lairesse's skepticism of "fine" painting as "one of those styles that make themselves too much noticed," at the expense of subject matter.

89. Roland Barthes, "The World as Object," in *Calligram: Essays in New Art History from France*, ed. Norman Bryson (Cambridge, 1988), 107. Emphasis in the original.

90. Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 126. Emphasis in the original.

91. Foster, "Art of Fetishism," 264.

92. *Ibid.*, 263–64.

93. Woodall, "Laying the Table," 114.

94. *Ibid.*, 116.

95. *Ibid.*, 114.

Considered in this way, the spectacular nature of material riches in Amsterdam's emporia as well as the intense investment in the apparent ethereality of naturalistic painting mimic the social role of displaying affluence as a process unmoored from its ostensible goals. The surface, no matter how obsessively crafted, how deeply invested with time, labour, and skill, does not necessarily reference permanent, physical things.<sup>95</sup> Similarly, under Weber's rubric, material success or affluence never actually manifests piety, but only indicates it. Yet these references and indications were extremely important in Dutch society, and functioned as a kind of social currency all their own.

Painterly naturalism in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic appealed to a specifically consumerist sensibility in the world's first sophisticated capitalist economy. The naturalism of Kalf, Dou, Mieris, and others explicitly comprises investment of time, skill, labour, and materials, and these painters acted as tradesmen without embarrassment, seemingly with no intention or desire to strive for the "divine" status Vasari bestowed on earlier artists (many of whom were also shrewd businessmen). Their naturalism embodied the production processes and values of a deeply mercantile society: manifesting the transformations of commodification, hiding and obscuring the same types of labour as does capitalist production, and projecting an envisioned affluence as essential to Dutch culture as its material counterpart. These painters drew upon new habits of observing the natural world in order to foster a spectatorship appreciative of the work of painterly naturalism. Yet, paradoxically, at the same time, these habits of observation did not record the social labour—the grinding gears of a new capitalist commodity production—that yielded both *pronkstilleven* and the items depicted in them. What spectators saw instead were rich visions of material affluence, beguiling, yet loosed from the objects they staged. ¶