



Interior of the Old Church at Delft, 1653 or 1655

Emanuel de Witte (Dutch, 1617-1691)

Oil on panel | 19 ½ x 16 in. (49.5 x 40.6 cm)

- If it were not stated in the title of the painting, would it be evident that this is a church? Why or why not?

VISUAL ANALYSIS

Interior of the Old Church at Delft uses architecture rather than figures to illustrate the social context of the painting. The focus of the work seems to be the setting itself, an old cavernous church and the play of light on the interior of the building, rather than the patrons within the space. Still, the scene consists of several figures of differing activities and social standing, including a *bourgeois* man in a red

cape, a mother with her children sitting in an alcove, and a man dressed in black casually walking his dog. In the more shaded and distant areas of the church, other people are utilizing the space in a similarly comfortable manner. There is a sense that despite the vast space, indicated by the differing light quality and the deft use of *scaling*, this is a communal location and available to all wishing to occupy it. The source of light is not shown, thus creating the illusion of spontaneous illumination that is juxtaposed with the very realistic manner in which the light is painted.

FUNCTION/Form & Style

One of the more stunning aspects of this painting is the artist's ability to capture extremes of light and shadow in the church. The composition articulates depth of space through the use of *contrasting values*. The illusion of interior depth is conveyed by gradually increasing the amount of shadow in areas as they become further removed from the foreground. The bright lighting emphasizes the stark white walls of the church, alluding to the Protestant Reformation and the subsequent removal of all religious or iconic objects from former Catholic cathedrals.

The study of light and shadow in the work illustrates the interest of 17th century Netherlandish artists in science's ability to realistically reproduce the actual world in paint. Along with the bare white walls, the informal placement and manner of the figures indicates the transformation of this building from a Catholic structure to a Protestant one. The communal and casual atmosphere, as it is presented, contrasts with the implied former atmosphere of ritual acts between preacher and congregation.

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE

Seventeenth century *Netherlands* is emblematic for shifts in religious,

- How do these people relate to one another? What does their “relationship” say about the role of the church during this time period?
- How do the people depicted in the painting serve to illustrate scale?
- How is the scientific exploration of optics reflected in this piece?

social, scientific, and philosophical outlooks. The rise of a powerful *bourgeois* merchant class ousted the former ruling aristocracy. This shift is evident in the type of patrons commissioning new paintings. It was one of these bourgeois private patrons who commissioned *Interior of the Old Church at Delft*. No longer was the power to create images exclusive to the Church or the wealthy.

This transition accompanied the **Protestant** Reformation, started by Martin Luther in 16th century Germany. The growing protestant sects advocated for a more austere religion regarding both ritual and the decoration of places of worship. The church featured in this painting is seemingly stripped of its religious symbolism. This was a common practice in Holland at the time: churches became less focused on religious expression and more on communal values, so they were

sparsely decorated, sometimes with black funerary plaques displayed on the walls. Social progression was not the only movement occurring in the Netherlands at this time. Much of this painting relies on the juxtaposition of light and shadow: contemplation of this idea may be due to the scientific investigation of *optics* in Delft at the time. The verifiability of this painting as a precise representation of this church, however, can certainly be questioned. De Witte approached his depictions of architectural structures like those of a landscape painter, employing “plausible and sometimes actual elements to create largely invented views.”

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

As part of the school of 17th century Dutch painters, Emanuel de Witte was the first to place an emphasis on the architectural interior as an independent subject for painting.

VOCABULARY

Acrostic: Derived from the Greek, meaning “top verse.” in which the first letter, syllable or word of each line or paragraph spells out another message. This technique is sometimes used as a device to aid one’s memory

Bourgeois: A term of French origin; of or belonging to the middle class.

Contrast: The relative difference between areas of light and dark.

Netherlands: Also known as Holland, a low-lying country in north-central Europe on the coast of the North Sea. During the time of the Dutch Republic (1581 - 1795), The Dutch grew to become one of the major seafaring and economic powers of the 17th century. This period is known as the ‘Dutch Golden Age.’

Optics: The science that describes the behavior and properties of light and the interaction of light with matter

Protestant: A sect of Christianity that was, originally, a separatist movement from the Church of Rome during the Reformation (c. 1517 - 1648).

Scaling: A succession or progression of steps or degrees; graduated series.

Value: Degree of lightness or darkness in color.

OHIO ACADEMIC CONTENT STANDARDS

Study of this work and its related classroom activities meets some or all of the following K-12 benchmarks:

- **Language Arts:** Acquisition of Vocabulary; Communications: Oral and Visual; Concept of Print, Comprehension Strategies and Self-Monitoring Strategies; Information, Technical, and Persuasive Text; Research; Writing Process
- **Mathematics:** Geometry and Spatial Sense; Mathematical Processes; Measurement
- **Sciences:** Physical Sciences; Science and Technology
- **Social Studies:** Citizenship Rights and Responsibilities; Economics; Geography; History; People in Societies; Skills and Methods
- **Visual Arts:** Analyzing and Responding; Connections, Relationships, and Applications; Historical, Cultural, and Social Contexts; Valuing the Arts/Aesthetic Reflection

He lived in Delft from 1641 to 1651, and then, from 1652, in Amsterdam, where he began his long career, first as an unpromising figure painter, before fame came with his shift in focus to structure rather than sociality. Amsterdam also brought him many financial and

personal problems: his second wife and his step-daughter were convicted of theft, and his quick temper and sharp tongue did little to help his dealings with the police or creditors. Buried in debt and emotional difficulties, de Witte committed suicide at age 75.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

LANGUAGE ARTS: Pick a structure that plays a large role in the life of the community or individual families, and compile a list of adjectives that describe it. Create an *acrostic* poem using these words. (*Middle School*)

MATHEMATICS: Try to measure the dimensions of the church using reproductions of this painting. How big would the church be if the man in the red cloak were as tall as the tallest person in your class? What aspects of the painting make it hard to get an exact answer? (*Elementary and Middle School*)

SCIENCE: The scientists of Delft during this time were studying the field of optics, or the study of light and its interaction with matter. Try a series of experiments with concave, convex, and flat mirrors. In each experiment, begin with the mirror positioned very close to a print of the painting, and then slowly move it away. Make a table noting which mirrors and at what point they enlarge the man in the red cloak, make him smaller, or show him upside down. (*Middle and High School*)

SOCIAL STUDIES: Use the details within the painting to guess what role in society the church played during this time period. Could only specific people, like the upper class, attend church? In what activities are the people in the painting engaged? (*All Ages*)